

BRITISH COMMANDO 1940-45



ANGUS KONSTAM

ILLUSTRATED BY GRAHAM TURNER

WARRIOR 181

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Series Editor Marcus Cowper

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INTRODUCTION

The British Commandos were created in response to a disaster. On 10 May 1940 the Germans launched their invasion of France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Just as they did in 1914, British troops fought alongside their Belgian and French counterparts, but this time there would be no stemming the German juggernaut. On 22 May the Panzers reached the English Channel. The British and isolated French units retreated towards Dunkirk, and on 27 May the evacuation of Allied troops began. Over the next eight days more than 300,000 Allied troops were rescued and spirited to safety in Britain. Prime Minister Winston Churchill might have called the evacuation the miracle of Dunkirk, but there was no disguising the scale of the military disaster.

France had been defeated and was now occupied by German troops. Britain had been driven from the European mainland, and while its army was largely intact it had lost much of its equipment. However, even as the last troops were being brought off the beach, Churchill wrote to the Chiefs of the General Staff arguing that Britain needed to regain the initiative and avoid adopting a defensive mentality. His solution was this: 'We should immediately set to work to organize raiding forces on these coasts, where the populations are friendly. Such forces might be composed of self-contained, thoroughly equipped units.' The Chiefs of Staff considered the idea on 6 June, and duly approved plans for the formation of this special fighting force which would carry out raids on German-occupied Europe.



Burning oil tanks at Stamsund in the Lofoten Islands. On 4 March 1941, the Norwegian archipelago was raided by Commandos of Nos. 3 and 4 Special Service Battalions. Before leaving they blew up fish factories, fuel tanks and military installations.

This force became the Commandos, named after the irregular Afrikaner formations

which had harried the British so effectively during the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). Lieutenant-Colonel Dudley Clarke, who first came up with the title, later wrote: ‘I suggested the name Commando from the very start... although it was a long time before War Office circles would unbend sufficiently to use the word in official papers without visible pain.’ A plea for volunteers to undertake special service of a hazardous nature was answered by thousands of servicemen, and the men selected to lead the newly created battalion-sized Commandos and their subordinates set about selecting the very best men the British Army had to offer. The heads of this force were under intense pressure to launch these men on raids as quickly as possible, but after two unsuccessful operations common sense prevailed and the Commandos were allowed the time they needed to train and prepare.



A well-armed soldier of No. 3 Commando is pictured crawling through the shrubbery of Achnacarry House during an exercise there in early 1942. He is armed with a Thompson machine carbine and a fearsome-looking machete. Balaclavas were often worn in winter.

All Commando volunteers went through a rigorous training process, designed to produce men who excelled at the demanding tasks they would be set. Initially, training

was haphazard and ad hoc, but eventually a rigorous but highly effective training programme came into being. Some units specialized in certain areas, such as parachute landing, the use of canoes, warfare in the Arctic or demolition. After the war, these formations evolved into elite outfits such as the SAS and the SBS, which still exist today. Whatever formation they served in, Commandos were known for their superb training, their professionalism and their toughness. Essentially they became the elite of the British armed forces.

The first properly planned raids were carried out in 1941, and the following year the force was expanded to include the Royal Marines, whose Commandos were brigaded with their army counterparts. Despite initial teething problems, and a good deal of inter-unit rivalry, they soon became their equal in terms of professionalism. Together they landed on the beaches of Normandy, conducted raids in the Mediterranean and took part in the gruelling final campaigns of the War in the Pacific. Regardless of their origins, these Commandos – British Army and Royal Marine – came to be highly regarded for their professionalism, their dedication and immense fighting spirit.

When the war ended, the Commandos had a fighting reputation second to none. However, they were then disbanded, save for a solitary brigade of Royal Marine Commandos, as it was felt there would be little use for this kind of warfare in the post-war world. Ironically, the Royal Marines, who have maintained the standards of these elite fighting formations to the present day, subsequently fought in virtually all of Britain's post-war conflicts. While these Marines maintain the legacy of the wartime British Commandos, their forebears, the men Churchill described in October 1942 as 'a hand of steel' formed during the darkest days of World War II, are now regarded as some of the finest and best trained combat troops of the war.

CHRONOLOGY

1939

3 September Britain and France declare war on Germany.

1940

9 April The German invasion of Norway and Denmark begins.

20 April The first Independent Companies formed.

May Lochailort Special Training Centre opens, for the training of Special Forces.

8 May to 8 June Five Independent Companies participate in the Norwegian Campaign.

10 May Germany invades France and the Low Countries. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain resigns, and is succeeded by Sir Winston Churchill.

27 May The first Allied troops are evacuated from Dunkirk.

4 June Completion of Operation *Dynamo*, the evacuation of Dunkirk.

3–6 June Churchill calls for a force able to strike back against German-occupied Europe.

6 June Chiefs of Staff approve Churchill's plans for striking companies.

12 June Lt. Gen. Sir Alan Bourne appointed as Commander, Offensive Operations.

20 June The call for volunteers, first issued in just two commands, becomes a general one.

22 June France signs Armistice with Germany.

24 June Operation *Blue Collar*, an Independent Company raid near Boulogne.

July Middle East Commandos formed in Egypt.

3 July Offensive Operations rebranded as the Combined Operations Directorate (COD).

14 July Operation *Ambassador*, a joint Commando and Independent Company raid on Guernsey.

17 July Admiral Roger Keyes appointed head of COD.

11 November Special Service Brigade formed under Brigadier Joseph C. Haydon.

1941

February A Commando force (Layforce) is sent from Britain to the Middle East.

February–March A new organization for Commandos is adopted.

3 March Operation *Claymore*, Commando raid on Norway's Lofoten Islands.

17 May No. 51 (ME) Commando captures Commando Hill during the Ethiopian campaign.

September Admiral Keyes replaced by Lord Louis Mountbatten.

26–28 December Operation *Anklet*, the second raid on the Lofoten Islands, carried out as a diversion in support of Operation *Archery*.

27 December Operation *Archery*, Commando raid on Vaagsø, Norway, proves a major success.

1942

February Commando Basic Training Centre opens at Achnacarry.

February The First Royal Marine Commando unit (A Commando) is formed in Deal Barracks, Kent.

28 March Mountbatten, now a vice-admiral, made Chief, Combined Operations.

26–29 March Operation *Chariot*, Combined Forces attack on St Nazaire in Nazi-occupied France.

5 May Operation *Ironclad*, Commandos participate in invasion of Madagascar.

June No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando formed from Allied volunteers.

19 August Operation *Jubilee*, the Dieppe Raid, Nos. 3 and 4 Commandos carry out diversionary raids.

7 October A Second Royal Marine Commando (B Commando) is formed in Pembroke Docks. Both RM units are later combined to become 40 (RM) Commando.

18 October Hitler issues his *Kommandobefehl* (Commando Order), stating that captured Commandos will be executed.

November Operation *Torch* begins, the Allied invasion of North Africa.

1 December A Commando Mountain and Snow Warfare Camp is opened near Braemar.

7–10 December Operation *Frankton*, the Cockleshell Raid carried out against Bordeaux, France.

1943

23 March Four Commandos captured during the Cockleshell Raid are executed by the Germans.

10 July Operation *Husky* begins, the Allied invasion of Sicily. Four Commando units participate.

9 September Operation *Avalanche* begins, Allied invasion of Italy, with landings at Salerno. 2nd Special Service Brigade sees heavy fighting.

The Special Service Group is formed, amalgamating all Commandos (Army and RM) under one command.

November 3rd Special Service Brigade sent to the Far East.

1944

6 June Operation *Overlord*, the Allied invasion of North-West Europe begins in Normandy.

28 September Commencement of the third Arakan campaign begins in Burma.

1 November Operation *Infatuate*, the Allied landings on Walcheren, Holland.

6 December The term Commando officially replaces Special Service.

1945

January–February 3 Commando Brigade involved in heavy fighting in the Arakan.

8 May VE Day, the final defeat of Nazi Germany.

15 August VJ Day, the final defeat of the Japanese is announced.

1946 The Army Commandos are disbanded.

RECRUITMENT

The idea of a special raiding force actually predated the formation of the Commandos. On 20 April ten Independent Companies were formed, drawn from volunteers from the Territorial Army. Five of these companies duly saw action in Northern Norway. That summer, they, as well as all existing British Army units were needed to defend Britain against a German invasion. As the War Office was reluctant to weaken the Regular Army any more than it had to, it was felt that Churchill's striking force would be formed from new units rather than denuding the already overstretched army of existing units. This was done by requesting volunteers willing to undertake special service of a hazardous nature. Nothing else was specified, apart from a list of required attributes – the ability to swim, drive and be comfortable on the sea. These volunteers would be made available for selection for the new units, but as the War Office was equally keen not to weaken existing units unduly, one man in 20 from each battalion was placed among the number of men who would be withdrawn from their units.

The initial target was for a Commando force of 40 officers and 1,000 men, although when the number of volunteers proved much greater than anticipated, General Dill, Chief of the General Staff, permitted a force of 5,000 men to be raised, provided suitable men could be found among the volunteers. It was Dill's assistant Lt. Col. Dudley Clarke – a South African – who named this new force the Commandos. On 12 June, Maj. Gen. Sir Alan Bourne, Adjutant General of the Royal Marines, was appointed as Commander, Offensive Operations, and tasked, with Clarke's help, with organizing the force. It was he who issued the plea for volunteers and who appointed the leaders of the first battalion-sized Commandos.

However, after a couple of premature and abortive raids on the French coast near Boulogne and on Guernsey – raids Churchill dubbed silly fiascos – Bourne was replaced by Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, and his department re-named the Combined Operations Directorate (COD). This made little difference to the business of recruitment. However, it did reflect the upheavals taking place in Whitehall at the time as the War Office tried to limit the effectiveness of this private army. In general, the British military establishment had a distrust of shock troops, and it would be another year before the threat of disbandment was finally removed from the whole Commando programme. Meanwhile, the business of selecting men continued, training programmes were devised, and the collection of volunteers were turned into a first-class fighting force.



A rock-climbing exercise being carried out near the Commando training centre at Achnacarry. In this exercise the most able rock climber went first with the knotted rope and then the rest of the unit used it to follow him up the cliff face.



During training, amphibious landings were practised repeatedly on Loch Lochy, a sea loch close to Achnacarry. Often, these were opposed landings conducted under fire. In this exercise, Major 'Mad Jack' Churchill, broadsword in hand, leads his men ashore from a Eureka boat.

In early 1940 a similar selection had taken place for the Independent Companies, and most of these earlier Territorial Army volunteers became Commandos. Tom Trevor, who

went on to command No. 1 Commando, describes the procedure: 'The companies were recruited from volunteers. Each brigade found a platoon, and each battalion a section. The sections were led by officers. The Headquarters of the Independent Companies had a section of the Royal Engineers under an officer, and an ammunition section, provided by the Royal Army Service Corps... There was also a medical section... and an intelligence section.' In total each of the ten companies raised that spring had a paper complement of 289, including 21 officers.

In September these men were amalgamated into the newly raised Commando formations, although the majority were used to form No. 1 Commando. This system was duly adapted by Sir Alan Bourne and Sir Roger Keyes to assuage fears that by taking too many men from one unit they would weaken it as it stood prepared to repel the German invader. However, this was achieved simply by selecting Commando recruits from all of Britain's regional commands, and so spreading the burden as evenly as possible.

Recruitment for the Commandos proper began in the summer of 1940, from men who answered the call for volunteers for special service of a hazardous nature. These volunteers answered in large numbers from all the regional commands in the British Isles, and from just about every branch of army service. This included the non-infantry services such as the Royal Army Service Corps and the Royal Engineers, as well as from the front-line services. To begin the process, a suitable volunteer officer was selected by the Offensive Operations Department (later the Combined Operations Department), and appointed as a Commando commanding officer, holding the rank of lieutenant-colonel. He in turn would choose ten officers to be his troop leaders, who either held the rank of captain or were promoted following their selection. These troop leaders would then have the job of recruiting their men, including two junior officers who would each lead one of the troop's sections.

One of these troop leaders was Captain Young of the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment, who was selected to join No. 4 Commando. He described the procedure as follows:

It was Tuesday 8th July 1940 when I was stationed in Bognor Regis that I was interviewed by Colonel Legard, commanding No. 4 Commando, and invited to command F Troop. I accepted his invitation... and went to the Salisbury Plain area to choose men for my troop. I established my headquarters in the George Hotel, Amesbury, and from there I set out each morning on the important task of finding the right men... Although the Lieutenant Colonel usually specified what type of men he was looking for, each troop commander had their own way of selecting men from the volunteers. Some selected men who were young, with no ties, while others preferred former Boy Scouts, musicians, and those who didn't brag or boast. Lt. Colonel Robert Laycock, the future commander of the Special Service Brigade, advised 'Choose your other ranks more carefully than you choose your wife.'

The selection process couldn't test some of the vital requirements for a Commando, the ability to swim, drive, avoid seasickness and a willingness to parachute. Nor could the applicant's ability with weapons or level of fitness be accurately determined, save for what it said in his service records. The troop's commanders simply had to choose the men they considered the most suitable and hope that any shortcomings could be dealt with during training. There was certainly no shortage of volunteers that summer, and roughly one volunteer in six was selected for training as a Commando.

The reason men volunteered for this special service varied, but generally they fell into three groups. Many wanted to have a go at the Germans and felt their existing units,

usually deployed defensively around Britain's coast, didn't offer sufficient scope for this. They volunteered because they felt it was their duty to strike back at the enemy. Related to this was the feeling of many soldiers who had fought in France that the Regular Army had let the country down, and this hurt their sense of professional pride. They wanted revenge, and special service offered them a chance for it. Others were men from support units whose units or military duties precluded them having a chance to fight. Volunteering gave them the opportunity to have a go. Above all, many – particularly the younger soldiers – volunteered because it offered the opportunity for fun and adventure, something garrison duty did not provide.



A Commando on Malloy Island watches the fighting in Vaagsø reach its climax, while the buildings serving the small island's gun emplacements burn below him. The Vaagsø raid was carried out on 27 December 1941 and, while Malloy was captured fairly easily, the German garrison offered stiff resistance in the village.



German prisoners captured during the raid on Vaagsø are escorted back to the landing craft. The Commandos were issued with white snow gloves for the operation, and several of the prisoner escort can be seen wearing them in the photograph.

The majority of the volunteers selected were young soldiers in their early 20s, although some were younger or even older – men who had served in the pre-war army, and who could be relied on to provide a steadying hand to younger and less experienced soldiers. While these men could have remained in their existing units, they volunteered in part to escape the discipline and routine of regular army life. Some had even seen service in World War I, or in the policing actions of the inter-war years, and had proved themselves under fire. While at first they might struggle to keep up with their younger comrades on marches or in assault courses, the selecting officers knew that a few of these old hands would prove a real boon to the unit if they were good and willing old soldiers.



On Malloy Island the gun batteries were captured without much resistance. After clearing the barracks, the Commando searched the rocky snow-covered island for hidden Germans before a detachment was sent across the fjord to reinforce the fight for South Vaagsø.

Above all, commanding officers and troop leaders wanted men who were fit, healthy, well disciplined, professional, tough, resilient and courageous. These traits were sought in all soldiers, but in addition the selectors were looking for men with other less common traits. They sought men who ideally were highly motivated, self-reliant and intelligent enough to use their own initiative. In short, they wanted men who would thrive in the Commandos, and who, with the right leadership and training, could be relied upon to do extraordinary things. By the end of July 1940, as these new Commando recruits were gathered together into their new units, the process began of turning them into what would generally be regarded as the best-trained fighting troops of the war.

TRAINING

It was clear that this new type of soldier needed to be trained in an equally innovative way. All of the volunteers selected for the Commandos had already gone through their basic military training, and so were proficient in the essentials of military life. Now, though, they had to learn new skills and were called on to rely on their own initiative rather than their blind obedience to orders. At first, training was as varied as were methods of recruitment. In a way, this reflected the independent nature of the Commandos and their unorthodox creation. However, as the war progressed a more coordinated and structured training programme was devised under the guidance of Brigadier John Durnford-Slater. While a uniform method of training might have produced less random results, all shared the same characteristic of being tougher than any training scheme yet devised in the British Army.

A ARMY COMMANDO, 1941–42



This young Commando sergeant wears the uniform worn by most Commandos during the first years of the war. It consists of the 1938-pattern battledress blouse and trousers, a pair of webbing anklets worn over his ammunition boots, and a set of 1937-pattern webbing. On his head the Commando wears the woollen cap comforter which became a hallmark of the Commando raider. His webbing set is shown in greater detail in **(7)** on the left, and consists of a waist belt, shoulder straps, ammunition pouches and a haversack. This was the equipment most commonly carried during an operation. Over his shoulder the sergeant carries an SMLE Mark III*.

To his left is an array of equipment used by commandos during this period. **(1)**; Short Magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE) rifle, Model 1, Mark III*, accompanied by its attendant bayonet and scabbard, as well as a five-round clip of .303in. ammunition. Below it are two examples of the Thompson machine carbine, or 'Tommy gun'; **(2)** M1928 variant and **(3)** M1921 variant. Most were fitted with a 20-round stick magazine, but a 30-round stick and a 50-round drum magazine were also issued. **(4)** A Mark I* steel helmet. **(5)** A Fairbairn-Sykes Commando Knife, Mark I.

(6) Pack, 1908 model, with support straps. **(7)** Full set of 1937-pattern webbing, including water bottle and carrier and haversack. **(8)** Examples of unit shoulder patches. The No. 3 Commando patch carries a troop identifier beneath it. The oval patch showing a salamander being consumed by fire was worn beneath No. 1 Commando's patch. **(9)** Model 1936 Hand Grenades (or 'Mills Bombs'). **(10)** British Bakelite Identity tags. **(11)** Inflatable life preserver belt. **(12)** Light grappling hook **(13)**.Toggle rope.

The training regime

The object of the training regime, as described by the commander of No. 2 Commando Lt. Col. Newman, was to have available a fully trained body of first-class soldiers, ready for active offensive operations against an enemy in any part of the world. It stressed initiative, physical fitness, mental alertness, tactical skill and professionalism. It called for, among other things, the ability to march seven miles in an hour in full fighting order, to climb cliffs, to operate effectively at night, to employ stealth, to use fieldcraft and live off the land, and to show skill in boat work and amphibious operations. It called for the ability to read maps, to drive vehicles, to use signals equipment and to deal with first aid emergencies. Above all it expected Commandos to be completely proficient in the effective use of a range of weapons, both British and enemy, as well as to show great skill in unarmed combat, street fighting, the use of knives and in the operation of explosives and demolition charges. In short the training regime was unlike anything else in the British Army.

Eventually, as the training programme became more established, the following percentage of training time was devoted to these various skills (all numbers are percentages):

Weapons training (including enemy weapons) and firing	30
Tactics, fieldcraft and training exercises	16
Speed marches, climbing and night training	14
First aid and map reading	10
Unarmed combat	10
Boatcraft	9
Mines, demolitions and explosives	4
Training films	3
Drill	4

This was in complete contrast to normal military training of the era, where drill was probably the single most important aspect of military training. Just as importantly, Commandos did not live in barracks like other soldiers, but boarded with the local community. They were fed, not in military canteens, but by their landlady. This was designed to foster self-reliance and initiative, and it worked. An added bonus was that it circumvented the need to waste time on unnecessary guard duties or other mundane barrack routines. So, more time could be devoted to the very specialized form of training the Commandos were given. While personal hygiene and smartness was encouraged, most of the time they were expected rather than enforced. Most men had their landladies wash their uniforms, and so this reduced the bull even more. In the Commandos, the ability to march at speed over long distances was considered far more important than precision on the parade ground. The very nature of the Commandos was such that normal standards were seen as irrelevant.



Commandos practise disembarking from an assault landing craft (LCA) at high speed while a Bren gun covers them from the port side of the vessel. This photograph was taken during a training exercise in late 1940.



A Commando equipped with a Bren gun pictured during the fighting for the Anzio beachhead in early 1944. Each Commando sub-section was equipped with a Bren LMG operated by a two-man team. Note that the Commando carries spare 30-round box magazines and has a Colt automatic pistol tucked into his belt.

Here, the ability to overcome all kinds of problems using initiative, physical prowess and extensive training was what mattered – and what would produce the first-class soldier Newman and other commanders sought. In fact, only by avoiding distractions such as barrack routines and unnecessary parades or kit musters was there sufficient time available to put the men through these often-rigorous training regimes. This daily routine, taken from the Daily Orders, was carried out by the men of No. 4 Commando during the late summer of 1940 while they were based at Weymouth:

0700 – Parade on the beach (whatever the weather), for PT and an early morning swim, followed by a run back to billets for breakfast. A good start to the day.

0900–1230 – Selection from the following:

Weapon training (rifle and bayonet, Bren, tommy gun, Boys AT rifle, revolver and grenades – no heavy weapons at this stage).

Short march (8–10 miles), frequently to an area where fieldcraft, map reading and compass training could be carried out.

Midday meal in billets, cafes or haversack meal (e.g. sandwiches provided by landladies).

14:00 – on Selection from: Boating, semaphore/signalling, cross-country running, demolitions, or briefing for night schemes, followed by rehearsals and practices.

On really sunny days we often had more swimming followed by compulsory sunbathing. The latter might sound bizarre, but Col. Legrand was convinced of the value of sun treatment when properly supervised, and also of the value of learning to relax.

This though, was subject to change. There was no such thing as a regular routine in Commando training. Some training such as long cross-country marches, tactical exercises or extensive boating and seamanship practice was usually an all-day affair, as was weapons firing at the ranges or the development of specialist skills such as cliff climbing or operating at night. This often meant sleeping away from the billets – either in barns or empty buildings, in bivouacs or else on the open ground.



The Goattley folding boat was a canvas and wood craft which could be flat-packed for easy transport in a small boat or submarine. In theory a dozen men could be transported in one. Here, Commandos rehearse disembarking on the shores of Loch Lochy.

One key element was physical and mental development. The sheer physical demands of this training routine far outweighed the requirement expected by the Physical Training

(PT) or marching requirements of the regular army. In the Commandos, conventional PT, where the men changed into shorts and vests was generally frowned upon. The idea was that physical exercise was part of overall training and should be done in normal military clothing. That way there was no divorcing of physical training from the rest of training. A Commando was expected to test his physical fitness on the battlefield rather than the sports field, and so PT was carried out in full kit. Of course, sporting competitiveness was encouraged – each Troop had its own football, rugby and boxing teams – but from the start demanding physical exercise was seen as a component part of Commando training.

The development of Commando skills

While each Commando developed its own training routine, all of them shared the same emphasis on core skills – long-distance marching, extensive weapons training, boat work and the carrying out of tactical exercises. Wherever the Commando was based, the local population became used to the sight of men marching long distances, regardless of the weather. The distances the men marched were steadily increased in length and duration, and they were always carried out in full kit – a total average load of around 60lb (27kg). Soon, marches of 30 miles became an accepted part of regular training. As volunteers had come from a range of units, an early problem was the pace of march. Light Infantrymen marched at 140 paces a minute, Guards at 110, and the rest of the army at 120 paces. The solution, of course, was that everyone would march at Light Infantry speed.

As well as marching long distances, Commandos were expected to march at speed. The requirement for speed marching was set at seven miles in one hour, wearing a basic fighting order kit, and the men were expected to be able to fight at the end of it. So, after a speed march, it was common to follow it with some relevant activity, such as completing an obstacle course, or firing practice. This fast pace was achieved by a combination of marching and doubling – the pace set by the troop sergeant major. So, after 10–15 minutes of fast-paced marching, the order would be given to double for roughly half that time again, before slowing down again to the fast marching pace. This placed great demands on the fitness and stamina of the Commandos, but it was deemed an essential skill when the men would be called upon to carry out a raid.

Longer distances were covered at a steady fast marching pace – the demand being for five miles in one hour or nine in two hours when dressed in Full Service Marching Order (FSMO, or full kit). The distance was gradually increased, so that the men could eventually cover 15 miles in 4½ hours, 25 miles in 8 hours, or 35 miles in 14 hours. After such a march, the men were allowed two hours' rest before they were expected to be able to fight effectively. Sometimes even longer marches were carried out. In the summer of 1940, No. 12 Commando marched 63 miles across the Northern Irish countryside in just 19 hours. What would once have been seen as an outstanding feat of marching had become commonplace. To keep spirits up, the men were encouraged to sing as they marched – anything from popular songs to bawdy ballads. This was designed to boost morale, which wasn't always easy when the men were soaked through, and marching through rain, snow, sleet or even blistering heat.

Equally important was weapons training. A Commando had to be utterly proficient in the use of a whole array of weaponry – not just the standard rifle, but also the machine carbine (sub-machine gun or tommy gun), the Bren light machine gun, the service pistol,

grenades and even specialist weapons such as the Boys anti-tank rifle. In 1940, ammunition was scarce, but as the war progressed it became common to train using live ammunition. Rapid well-aimed rifle fire had been a trademark of the British infantryman for half a century, and Commandos were expected to attain a rate of fire of 15 accurately fired rounds a minute using the short magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE). From 1941 onwards this weapon was gradually replaced by the No. 4 Rifle, which was similar but had an improved bayonet and backsight. The same rate of fire was expected from both weapons.



A Commando Bren LMG team moving across a wire obstacle on the training ground of Achnacarry. The loader has thrown himself down across the wire, allowing his pal to pass safely over him, before dropping down to fire. Presumably, the loader would join him after he disentangled himself.

While the rifle was the standard weapon of the Commando, everyone was also trained in the use of the tommy gun from the United States. Officially called the Thompson machine carbine, this was a quick-firing short-range weapon, which proved highly popular with the Commandos, and was ideally suited to them during their raids. By 1940 the Bren light machine gun (LMG) had been in service for five years and was a popular weapon. For the Commandos, though, using it as a static fire support weapon wasn't enough. They experimented with using it during the advance, firing from the hip like the tommy gun, and it proved effective and accurate when used in this more dynamic offensive way. So, the Commandos not only gained proficiency in a wide range of weapons, but they also developed their own tactics built around the aggressive nature of their role.



The rugged countryside of the Western Highlands offered the Commandos a superb training ground, with woods, streams, bogs, hills and cliffs forming a vast obstacle course. Here a Commando moves through a boggy stream, taking advantage of its cover to approach his objective.

While the rest of the British forces tended to conduct weapons training under peacetime conditions, in Commando training more realistic factors were introduced. For example, rather than a conventional concentric-ringed target, human-shaped silhouettes were used, and firing was conducted more on simulated battlefields than in well-established shooting ranges. In the remoter patches of countryside Commandos would practise fire and movement, shooting at moving targets like thrown metal plates and practising firing from a range of positions rather than the basic lying position favoured in army rifle ranges. It was all designed to make combat firing second nature.

From the start, Commandos were trained in boat craft and seamanship and were expected to be able to operate comfortably in a range of vessels, from canoes and inflatable rubber rafts to collapsible canvas Goatley boats, rigid dories and larger vessels such as landing craft. At first only a few landing craft were available, and other specialist craft didn't exist, so the skills were learned on a motley collection of small boats from fishing vessels to rowing boats. Naval whalers, cutters and launches were used extensively, and the Commandos soon became proficient in getting in and out of these craft. The emphasis was on landing quickly and quietly, and for most it took time and experience to learn these new maritime skills.

Others had lied about their ability to swim and had to learn fast when they faced a swim ashore. It was either that or risk being returned to unit (RTU). Swimming soon became an essential part of training. At first lifejackets weren't available, but by 1941 these became standard issue. By then, the Landing Craft Assault (LCA) was becoming more readily available and the men trained in operating and disembarking from these, by day or night, in a variety of sea conditions, and on both sandy beaches and rocky coasts. The men would race to assemble at their forming-up place (FUP) ashore before beginning their mission. Embarkation was seen as equally important – the emphasis being on the speedy and safe extraction of a raiding party after a mission was complete.

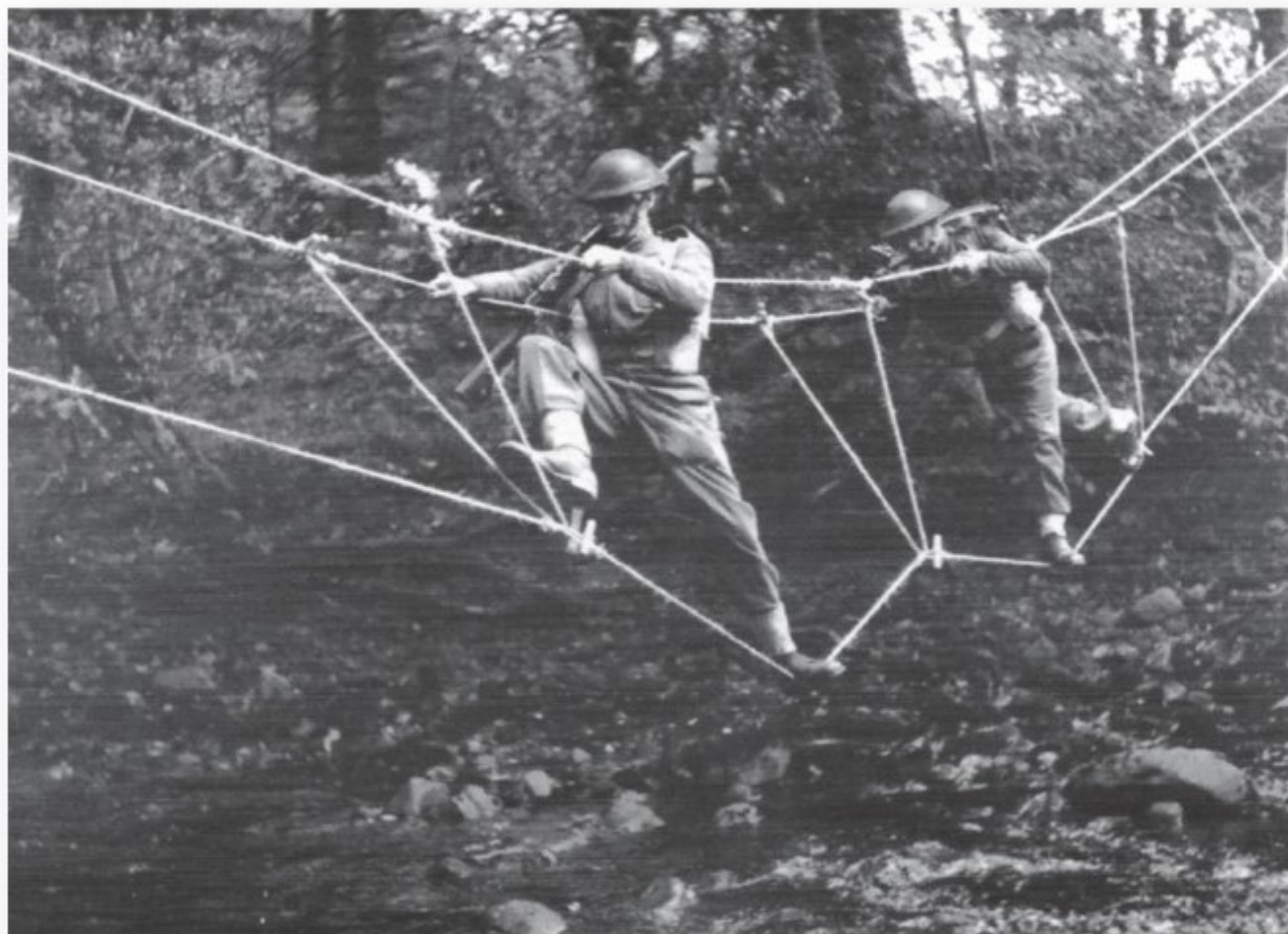
As well as the LCA, the 18ft dory proved an excellent raiding craft for smaller operations, while both the two-man canoe and the collapsible Goatley boat had their place in more clandestine operations as both could be easily stowed away in submarines or small coastal warfare vessels. Troops learned to fire their weapons from craft of all sizes, and soon amphibious landings were staged under realistic conditions – against LMGs firing on the flanks or over the heads of the landing force. Hidden dummy charges were rigged to explode on landing beaches, or in the sea, to create an even greater level of realism. This exercise was known as Battle Inoculation, and, like many live-firing exercises carried out during Commando training, it was designed to accustom the men to being under fire and to the sound of battle.

Commandos were also taught the arts of knife fighting, unarmed combat and the use of explosives and demolition charges. The Fairbairn-Sykes commando knife became a symbol of the Commandos, but it was designed as a practical killing weapon – ideal for silencing enemy sentries. The philosophy here was that in war you can't afford to be squeamish. If you can't kill your enemy with a firearm, then you should be able to do it with a bayonet, knife, machete or with your bare hands. Instructors told their students that by stabbing the carotid artery the victim would lose consciousness within five seconds and be dead shortly afterwards. While such forms of fighting were rare, it was important that all Commandos knew what to do when the moment came.

In the Commandos based or established in the Middle East, training sometimes took on a slightly different slant. There the Middle East (ME) Commandos were based in desert camps and marches were conducted across the desert. From these camps, marches of 30–50 miles were undertaken across sand, rocks or desert hills, and again the emphasis was placed on speed marching despite the gruelling conditions. The aim was to prepare the men for deep penetration raids around the desert flank of the enemy. However, for the most part the ME Commandos were expected to operate from boats, landing behind enemy lines on the North African coast or in the Aegean Sea. Boat training was carried out on the Great Bitter Lake or the Red Sea, and as landing craft were unavailable the same whalers were used for offensive operations in the Dodecanese in February 1941.

From the spring of 1941 onwards exercises became larger and more involved. They could involve house-clearing, the destruction of enemy installations, approach marches across difficult terrain, long-range reconnaissance, the capture of enemy prisoners and large amphibious landings. In all of these, the aim was to make the exercises as realistic as possible, so that the men knew exactly what to expect when they were called upon to do the same thing in earnest. Later in the war more specialist training in jungle warfare or

operating in arctic conditions would further expand the Commando repertoire. Above all, while the first months of training were carried out all around the country wherever the Commandos were based, the establishment of dedicated training camps in Scotland allowed this training to be taken to a whole new level of professionalism.



Commandos crossing a rope bridge made using toggle ropes during training near Achnacarry, c.1943. These short rope lengths, with a toggle at one end and a loop at the other, were carried by all Commandos and could be linked together to form longer ropes for climbing cliffs, or making bridges like this.

Training centres

In May 1940, after petitioning by Captain Bill Stirling and his cousin Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat, the War Office requisitioned Inverailort House near the hamlet of Lochailort beside Loch Eilt on the west coast of Scotland. This was first envisaged as a centre for the training of irregular forces and, after being rebranded as a Special Training Centre (STC), it was used as a training base for Commandos. The Independent Companies already had a training base at Achdaluie on Loch Eil, and this too became a Commando training camp. Lord Lovat helped secure other centres – Achnacarry House near Loch Lochy and Inverie House at Knoydart on Loch Nevis.

Achnacarry House would become the Commando Basic Training Centre (CBTC), while the other training camps would serve as satellites for more specialist forms of instruction. The deer forests between Achnacarry and Knoydart were also commandeered, giving the Commandos thousands of acres of rugged terrain above Loch Arkaig and Loch Nevis to train in. Later, other auxiliary training areas became available at Knoydart, Arisaig and

Moidart.

At Inverary near Fort William a Combined Training Centre (CTC) was established where a fleet of small boats of various sorts were housed, and where amphibious exercises could be carried out in the numerous sea lochs in the area. At Lochailort the instructors included many soldiers who would later make names for themselves in outfits like the SOE, the SAS and the Chindits. For the moment, though, they provided a training centre where intensive Commando training could be carried out. From July 1940 onwards, officers and selected NCOs of the newly formed Commando units were sent to Lochailort to be trained. They would then return to their units to pass on their new-found skills to their men.

However, Commando training would always be associated with Achnacarry between Loch Arkaig and Loch Lochy. Here the training facility consisted of Achnacarry House – sometimes called a castle – and a cluster of huts. The centre opened in March 1942 and by the end of the war over 25,000 men had been trained there – not just Commandos, but also American Rangers and various other Allied special forces. Here, four training troops went through the training routines pioneered since the summer of 1940, but with the added advantage that training was carried out in a centre surrounded by lochs, mountains and rugged terrain of all kinds. Mock-up villages were built and stormed, cliff climbing was practised on nearby crags, boat training took place on nearby Loch Lochy, including opposed landings, and cross-country marches ranged to Ben Nevis and beyond. Anyone who went through the CBT course without being RTUd was regarded as an exceptionally well-trained soldier. It is little wonder that the Commando Memorial now stands close to this legendary centre of Commando training just outside the Highland village of Spean Bridge.

B COMMANDO TRAINING IN THE HIGHLANDS, 1942



This montage shows various forms of training carried out at or close to the Commando Basic Training Centre at Achnacarry House, near Spean Bridge. The centre opened in March 1942 and remained in operation throughout the war. Trainees were allocated to a training troop and then put through a rigorous programme of physical development, weapons training, long-distance marches, rock climbing, boat training, tactical development and battlefield exercises. The upper scene shows Commando trainees crossing a rope strung across the river Arkaig. Rock climbing was practised either on the nearby slopes, or farther afield in Glencoe. Weapons ranges were situated close to the house, while close to the shores of Loch Arkaig trainees practised house clearing (shown here), as well as attacks on enemy strongpoints.

APPEARANCE

When their units were first formed, Commandos wore standard British Army khaki battledress, which consisted of a 1939 pattern serge blouse and trousers. This was normally worn with the 1937 pattern webbing, which had begun to replace the earlier 1908 pattern of web equipment when the war began. The Commandos wore a pair of black ammunition boots (or boots, ankle, general service) of the 1936 pattern, which were usually topped by webbing anklets. Headgear consisted of whatever was worn by the volunteer's original unit, so when they were first mustered Commando volunteers sported a wide variety of headwear. However, each man was also issued with a Mark 1* type steel helmet, which was essentially the pattern introduced in 1916 modified with a Brodie pattern helmet shell in 1936. From late 1940 this was gradually replaced by the similar but slightly improved Mark II helmet.



Tired-looking men from No. 4 Commando pictured after disembarking in Newhaven on the Sussex coast following return from the Dieppe Raid of August 1942. On the right, a Goatley folding boat can be seen, showing how little space these craft took up when stowed.

In its basic form the webbing set comprised a belt, brace straps, which were worn crossed at the back, shoulder straps designed to support a pack and ammunition pouches, which were linked to both the shoulder straps and the belt. Other webbing items included an entrenching tool carrier, a water bottle and carrier, a haversack (small back), a bayonet frog, a web pistol holster and a small ammunition pouch. Other related webbing was designed for use with specific weapons, such as the 'bandoleer, magazine, Sten', which

had pockets for seven Sten gun magazines, with similar special ammunition pouches designed for Bren LMG and Thompson machine carbine magazines. Wireless equipment also had its own web carrying case, while officers had their own designs of map cases, pistol or revolver holsters and binocular cases. Finally, gas masks were carried in their own pouches.

Other items of issued clothing which were less suitable for Commando training and operations were the Army's long, brown 1939 pattern double-breasted greatcoats, fatigue dress – a lightweight denim version of the battledress blouse and trousers – and PT kit, which consisted of blue shorts and white vests (actually T-shirts). As already noted, PT was usually conducted wearing standard items of uniform. However, the brown rubber and canvas PT shoes proved excellent for use when stealth was required and so they remained a useful part of Commando equipment. They were usually worn with standard grey woollen socks. Practicality and purpose were always considered more important than appearance.

Gradually, the Commandos were issued with more specific items of uniform. In 1940 they received their own version of the battledress trousers with an attachment for a Fairbairn-Sykes dagger scabbard on the left leg. A drab green Commando woollen jumper was issued from 1941 onwards – an item that was the precursor of the British forces ubiquitous 'wooly pully'. From 1942 ammunition boots with hobnailed soles as well as steel heel and toe plates, were replaced with boots with rubber heels and rubber crepe soles. Originally designed for soldiers working with ammunition where the hobnails could cause a spark, the rubber-soled boots were adopted by the Commandos as they made little or no noise when landing on a rocky beach.



The raid on St Nazaire was carried out on 27–28 March 1942 by 150 men from No. 2 Commando, supported by the navy, plus engineer detachments from other Commando units. Losses were high – 64 Commandos were killed and over 100 captured – but the raid was deemed a success. This aerial photograph taken after the raid shows the landing areas around Normandie Dock, the focal point of the raid, seen here as a diagonal rectangle linking the inner dock with the Loire Estuary.

Headgear remained varied in Commando units until 1942. Men reported for duty wearing whatever headwear had been worn in their original units – the field service cap (or sidecap), forage caps, Glengarrys, tam-o'-shanters, peaked caps and berets in various colours were seen. A solution to this lack of uniformity was to introduce the woollen cap comforter as a form of headwear. This was a green knitted tube, closed at one end, which when folded back made a practical head covering. It was designed to be worn under the old pattern of steel helmet, but it soon became an emblem of the Commandos. Still, no official headgear was issued throughout the early part of the war, although Nos. 2 and 9 Commandos adopted the tam-o'-shanter, despite it being a distinctively Scottish form of headwear.

In No. 1 Commando it was decided to adopt the beret as it had no national affiliation and it was easy to stow away when not worn. After some deliberation a green beret was chosen, and in late 1941 a Scottish firm was commissioned to make them. When asked to approve the new unit headgear, Brigadier Laycock of the Special Service Brigade considered it an ideal solution for all Commando units. However, the War Office was reluctant to approve the issue of a distinctive form of Commando headwear. It continued to resist it even after the younger and smaller Parachute Regiment was issued its distinctive maroon beret. Finally, though, the green beret was approved and duly adopted in the autumn of 1942. However, the cap comforter – or Commando cap – continued to be worn, as did the steel helmet.



Commandos coming ashore at Sarande on the coast of Albania in September 1944 during Operation *Mercerised* (the attack on Sarande). In the prow is Brigadier Tom Churchill, commander of the 2nd Special Service Brigade. The landing was part of an operation conducted in support of local partisans.

The other major change to the Commando uniform was also introduced in late 1942. In the Parachute Regiment, a khaki-drill smock had been designed to be worn over a parachutist's battledress.



Men of No. 40 (RM) Commando, pictured on 24 September 1944, preparing to move inland from Sugar Beach at Sarande, Albania. These men, along with No. 2 Commando, captured the area after a bitter fight, which in turn led to the German surrender of nearby Corfu.

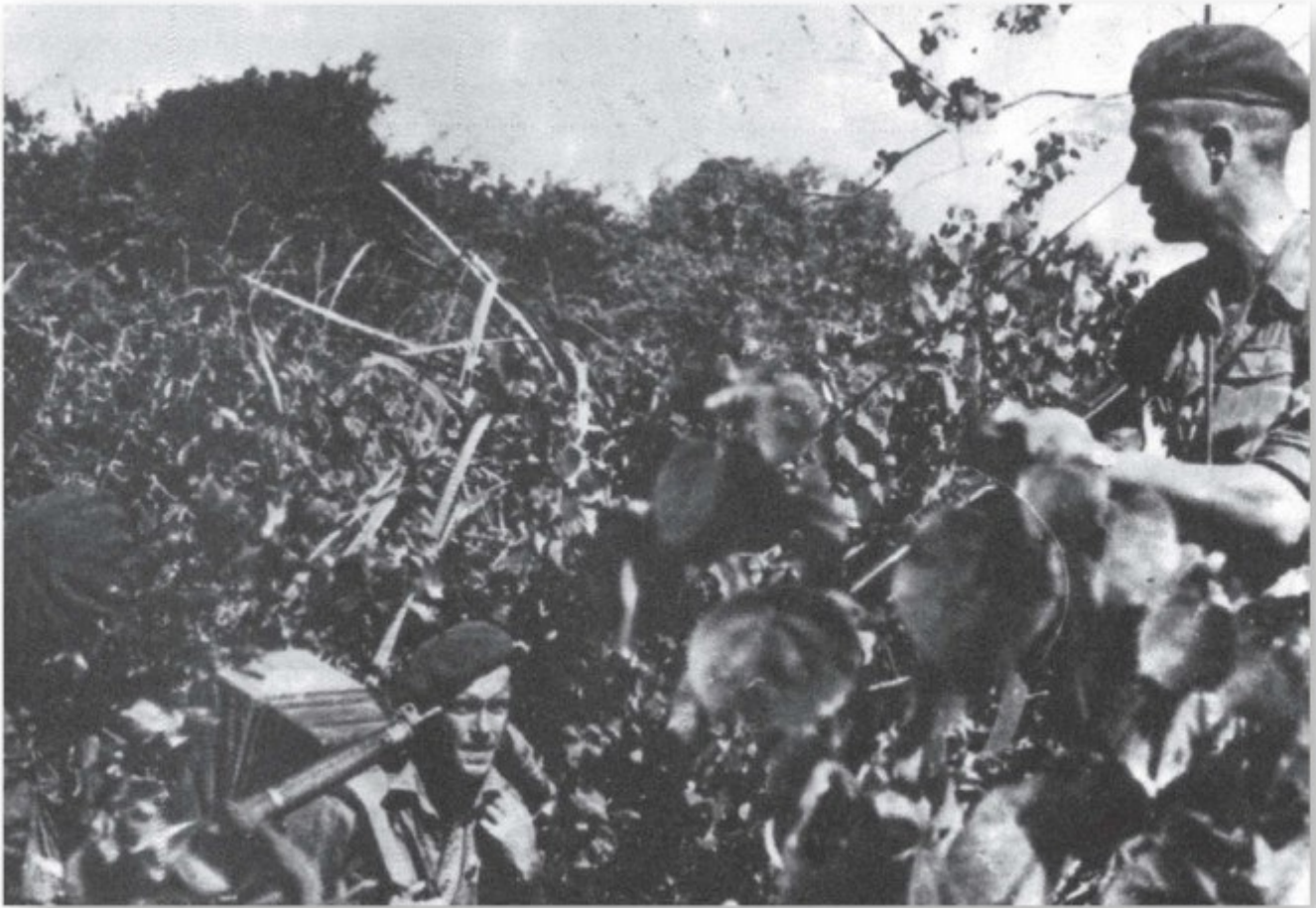
Named the Denison smock after the major who first designed it, based in part on the German jumpsuit used in 1940–41, this khaki-drill coverall was dubbed the ‘Airborne Smock Denison Camouflage’, and was first issued to airborne troops in early 1942. In its original form it was a true smock which had to be stepped into, but it was later adapted as a jacket with a zip running down its front. Then a lighter windproof camouflaged smock was developed, which resembled the airborne Denison smock but was made from a lighter cotton. It was camouflaged with two shades of green and brown over a tawny-coloured base. Although designed to be worn over the battledress, it was also worn over a shirt and pullover. While the airborne Denison had a strap, which passed between the legs to prevent the smock riding up during a parachute jump, the lightweight smock issued to Commandos had a straight bottom, edged with a drawstring.

During the last years of the war Commando units went into action wearing either the battledress blouse or the lightweight smock. The choice of clothing was largely down to the Commando’s commanding officer, or the Special Service Brigade commander. Outside North-West Europe a variety of other forms of clothing were worn depending on the theatre. For instance, ME Commandos often wore shorts with battledress blouses or pullovers, while sand-coloured suede desert boots often replaced black ammunition boots. Also lightweight khaki drill trousers and shirts were worn in North Africa, Sicily and Italy. In the Far East, standard jungle green shirts and trousers were worn.

Even in North-West Europe the uniform could vary. During the St Nazaire raid, kilts with a khaki apron were worn by some Commandos, while in operations in Norwegian

waters warmer weather clothing was preferred, including greatcoats, balaclavas (worn under steel helmets), leather sleeveless jerkins, and – later in the war – white snow smocks and trousers. From 1941 on, troops were issued with the Bergen rucksack – a far more practical piece of equipment than the older large pack or haversack. The Bergen had its own metal frame, so there was no need to wear cumbersome support webbing with it, and, more importantly, it could be easily taken off when the Commando needed to appear less visible. Effectively, Commandos had considerable leeway to wear what they wanted – or at least what their officers allowed them to wear. This allowed them to adapt their dress to a greater extent than most other units in the British Army.

Finally, when the Commandos were formed there were no guidelines when it came to unit insignia and so commanders forged their own path. As a result, various styles of shoulder flashes were worn. While the use of unit identifying numbers was discouraged for security reasons, this was circumvented by the use of symbols or unique designs. It was also ignored. So, during the Vaasgø Raid of December 1941, men went ashore wearing shoulder flashes identifying their unit (e.g. 3 Commando), with troop numbers underneath. Some units merely had a shoulder flash bearing the title Commando. In May 1943 the security restrictions were relaxed and unit numbers were officially incorporated into the men's insignia. Royal Marines had 'Royal Marines' inserted between the number and 'Commando', while the Combined Operations patch was also issued to be worn on each arm. Then, in late 1944, a new triangular patch was introduced featuring a red commando dagger on a blue background. In theory these insignia were designed to encourage unit pride. For most, though, being a Commando was a source of sufficient pride in itself.



Royal Marine Commandos during a pause in their advance through the mangrove swamps near Kangaw in January 1945. The advance of the 3rd Commando Brigade led to victory at Hill 170 in what was the decisive engagement of the Arakan Campaign.

EQUIPMENT

When they were first formed, Commandos were issued with similar weaponry to the rest of the British Army. This changed as new weapons became available, and both unit and troop commanders and even individual men were to some extent allowed to choose weapons that suited both them and their mission. The basic arsenal consisted of the short magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE) rifle with its 18in.-long bayonet, the Bren light machine gun (LMG), which was used as a section support weapon, and the hand grenade – usually the Mills No. 36 grenade. In addition, other weapons such as the Boys anti-tank rifle (ATR) and the .38in. Smith & Wesson pistol were issued when required.

The SMLE had been in service since before World War I and was a bolt-action .303in. weapon with a ten-round magazine. A Commando was expected to fire 20 well-aimed rounds (two magazine clips) in a minute, and a combination of accuracy, range and firepower made it and its slightly modified replacement, the No. 4 rifle, the cornerstone of the Commando's arsenal throughout the war. It could also be fitted with a cup discharger and used to launch No. 36 grenades. This modification, which turned the SMLE into the EY rifle, had an effective range of around 200 yards.



One of the principal reasons the small Norwegian port of Vaagsø was selected as a Commando target was the value of the fish processing and fish oil storage facilities there. Here a warehouse is left burning fiercely as the Commandos prepare to withdraw.

An even more useful support weapon was the LMG. The Bren could fire both single rounds or short bursts of .303in. ammunition and was fitted with a 30-round magazine, although only 28 were usually loaded to save wear on the magazine spring. It was fitted with a bipod mount and was extremely accurate. Its only real limitation was that its barrel

overheated rapidly, and so Commandos carried a spare barrel that could be fitted in a matter of seconds. In the Commandos, the Bren was also fired from the hip while advancing, providing an advancing section with suppressive fire as it moved forward. Spare magazines were carried by both the two-man LMG team and other members of the Commando section, ensuring that this useful weapon was well supplied with ammunition.



The main street of South Vaagsø immediately after the Commandos cleared the hamlet of Germans. In the foreground a Commando demolition team can be seen, while smoke from burning storage facilities on the waterfront can be seen in the background.

In the late summer of 1940, the first deliveries of the Thompson sub-machine carbine (TSMC or tommy gun) arrived from the United States, and proved popular weapons. This sub-machine gun fired a .45in. snub-nosed round, which gave it a greater stopping power than the SMLE or the LMG. Ammunition could be supplied in a 50-round drum or a 20-round stick or box magazine. Both were tried, but the tendency of the drum to jam meant that commandos soon adopted the box magazine. It was a very popular weapon but it had three weaknesses. Officially its effective range was less than 100 yards while the SMLE was accurate at over 500 yards. In practice it was difficult to hit targets more than 50 yards away. This made it a close-quarters weapon. It had a high rate of fire, which meant that if the user wasn't careful he could easily waste ammunition. The longer the burst, the less accurate the weapon was, thanks to its recoil which forced the gun up and to the right.

Jack Churchill (1898–1961)

Born in Ceylon, Jack Churchill served as an army officer for ten years before leaving the service in 1936. He rejoined the Manchester Regiment at the outbreak of war, and in 1940 became the only British soldier of the conflict to kill an enemy using a bow and arrow. He volunteered for the Commandos and duly became a troop commander in No. 3 Commando. During the Vaagsø raid (1941) he played his bagpipes during the approach to the landing area and then wielded a broadsword during the attack. This earned him the nickname 'Mad Jack'. This broadsword appeared again in September 1943 when, as commanding officer of No. 2 Commando, Churchill wielded it during

the Salerno landings. When asked why he carried the sword, he replied that in his opinion any officer who went into action without one was improperly dressed. He saw further service with No. 2 Commando in the Adriatic and, badly wounded, was captured in June 1944 together with his sword and bagpipes.

Peter Young (1915–1988)

After studying history in Oxford, Young joined the army in 1938 and two years later he fought in France. He volunteered for the Commandos and in June 1940 became a troop leader in No. 3 Commando. A few weeks later he took part in Operation *Ambassador* – a bungled raid on Guernsey; the following year he led his troops into action on the Lofoten Islands and later at Vaagsø. After promotion, and the award of a Military Cross, he participated in the Dieppe Raid (1942) before being sent to the Mediterranean. He fought in Sicily and Italy and was rewarded with the command of No. 3 Commando. He led it ashore in Normandy (1944) and saw extensive action on the bridgehead's left flank. He was subsequently sent to the Far East as second in command of 3rd Commando Brigade where he saw further action during the Arakan Campaign in Burma. He ended the war as a brigadier. Afterwards he resumed his historical studies and wrote several key military history books, including a number of Men-at-Arms titles for Osprey. A founding wargamer, he also went on to found the English Civil War re-enactment group The Sealed Knot.

Although it wasn't a particularly accurate weapon, the Thompson could be devastatingly effective at short range in the right hands and they were issued in considerable numbers to the Commandos as they were considered eminently suitable weapons to carry on raids. From early 1941 on, it was augmented by the much simpler British-built Sten machine carbine (SMC, or simply the Sten gun). It was designed in 1940 when Britain was threatened with invasion and so was a mass-produced and crude weapon, but it worked. The Sten fired a 9mm round, and was fitted with a 32-round magazine. Commandos, though, usually loaded just 30 rounds into it as a full load placed stress on the springs and induced jams. It had all the disadvantages of the Thompson, and it was more prone to jamming. However, its smaller calibre round meant that more ammunition could be carried. Generally though, while both weapons were popular, the tommy gun was preferred to its crude British counterpart.

The Boys ATR fired a .55in. armour-piercing round which came in a five-round magazine. However, it was incapable of penetrating the armour of most modern tanks and so was really of use only in destroying support vehicles or half-tracks. It was cumbersome, and when fired it kicked like a mule. However, it was useful as a support weapon thanks to its extreme accuracy at ranges of up to 250 yards. It was predominantly used to engage enemy pillboxes, bunkers or occupied buildings. It was never a popular weapon, though, largely because it weighed 35lb (16kg) and was awkward to carry, particularly over long distances or when moving at speed.



Brigadier John Durnford-Slater (left, the deputy commander of Combined Operations) and Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Young, commander of No. 3 Commando, pictured at La Plein in Normandy, during the Commando's defence of the left flank of the Normandy bridgehead.

In early 1943 it was replaced by the 'Projectile, Infantry, Anti-Tank' (PIAT). This lightweight anti-tank weapon was reasonably effective but had a maximum range of only 100 yards. The Commandos also found it useful as a bunker buster. Another useful support weapon was the 2in. mortar. It could fire high-explosive (HE) or smoke rounds with a range of up to 500 yards, although its effective range was a little over half that. It was operated by a two-man team, one of whom carried the mortar bombs in a six-round case. Other rounds were carried by the crew in webbing pouches. The mortar was light and could be set up and fired rapidly. One such weapon was attached to each troop headquarters, and proved particularly useful in providing a quickly laid smokescreen during an assault.

The No. 36 Mills grenade (nicknamed the pineapple) was another weapon of World War I vintage, but it was no less effective for its age. It could be thrown about 25 yards, and was fitted with a seven-second fuse, activated when the safety lever was released. During 1942 the No. 69 and No. 77 grenades were introduced. The first, with a black Bakelite casing was lighter than the Mills grenade, and caused less damage, but it was ideal when thrown into a confined space immediately before the Commandos stormed in. Effectively

it was a house-clearing weapon. The No. 77 was a tin-cased smoke grenade, which used phosphorous, which in turn caused burns to anyone inside its blast radius. Commandos also used sticky bombs as anti-tank weapons, but these were rarely carried.

Other heavier support weapons were also used. From late 1942 onwards a Heavy Weapons Troop consisting of machine-gun and mortar sections formed part of each Commando. The .303in. Vickers medium machine gun (MMG) was a long-established infantry weapon, as was the 3in. mortar. The MMG had a range of up to 3,000 yards and, while a heavy weapon, it could fire 500 rounds a minute, giving the Commandos some very useful supporting fire during an attack or when defending a position. The section consisted of two detachments, each of one gun and four crew. The Ordnance ML 3in. mortar LR had an effective range of 2,800 yards, and could fire both HE and smoke rounds. These rounds weighed 10lb and so everyone in the Heavy Weapons troop went ashore with at least two rounds, while more were carried by other men in the Commando as a reserve. Again, the section consisted of two weapons commanded by a subaltern, a sergeant and aided by a signaller. Each mortar had a four-man crew.

Finally, Commandos carried the fighting knife designed by Captains William Fairbairn and Erik Sykes. It was primarily a thrusting weapon, but it could also be thrown with some accuracy. Initially manufactured by Wilkinson Sword it came in a number of versions, but all shared its cold efficient simplicity of design. Other weapons, including knuckledusters, knives, machetes and even a Scottish broadsword (by 'Mad Jack' Churchill) could be carried, but it was the Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife which would be for ever associated with the British Commando.



The men of No. 3 Commando, pictured at Warsash on the river Hamble near Southampton on 5 June 1944. That evening, they would embark in the transports that would take them across the English Channel to Normandy. A memorial now marks the spot where the Commandos boarded their invasion craft.

C EQUIPMENT USED DURING COMBINED OPERATIONS, 1942–44



As well as the basic weapons illustrated on pages XX–XX, Commandos employed a wide range of weapons during raids. Some of the more common are shown here. **(1)** The Vickers GO Light Machine Gun (also known as a 'K Gun'), used as a support weapon by Commandos from 1943. It fired a .303in. round. **(2)** The Sten machine carbine Mark II used as an alternative to the Thompson. **(3)** Camouflaged commando sniper equipped with a No. 4 Rifle fitted with No. 36 Mark II telescopic scope. **(4)** 2in. Mortar, used as a troop support weapon capable of firing both HE and smoke rounds. **(5)** Cockle Mark II collapsible canoe, as used in the Cockleshell Raid against shipping in Bordeaux, December 1942. The canoe was 15ft long and could seat two people. **(6)** A No. 36 (HE) Grenade, a larger No. 69 (HE) grenade and a No. 77 (Smoke) grenade. **(7)** Smatchet combat knife, designed for both stabbing and slashing. **(8)** Magnetic limpet mine, type 6, Mark II, used for small-unit Commando attacks on enemy shipping in all theatres.

CONDITIONS OF SERVICE

It is hard to pin down exactly what everyday life for a British Commando entailed as there was no such thing as a regular routine – only a round of preparations for action interspersed with operations, which could be planned and carried out at short notice. However, from the start it was clear to the volunteers that the military life they had experienced before their selection as Commandos bore little relation to what was now expected of them. From the beginning, it was decided that Commandos would not be housed in conventional army barracks on an army camp cut off from the rest of the world. Instead they would be responsible for their own quartering and feeding. In the British Army of the early 1940s this was a somewhat revolutionary idea, as soldiers were expected to live in the disciplined environment of an army base where parade ground spit and polish and an ordered routine were the norm.



A group of men from No. 3 Commando in Normandy, having liberated some local livestock to help augment their rations. Self-sufficiency was encouraged in the Commandos, and so foraging of this kind was viewed with more tolerance than in other army units.

It was estimated that at any particular time, 20 per cent of a British infantry battalion stationed in a barracks would be employed on non-combatant duties such as carrying out base guard duties or other domestic camp chores. For the Commandos this was considered unacceptable as these men were therefore not available for training. So, by rejecting the use of barracks, the founders of the Commandos achieved two things. First, they avoided the need to waste time on camp duties. Second, they fostered a spirit of self-reliance and

self-sufficiency among the Commandos themselves. So, when a Commando was formed it was allocated a home town. When the men arrived, they were allocated temporary billets for a few days and issued a ration card and a daily subsistence allowance. They were then told to go out and find lodgings. Fortunately, there were always plenty of local families or landladies willing to do their bit and the Commandos were soon duly billeted around their unit's home town.



An Assault Landing Craft in the Ulvesund off Vaagsø island. Its embarked Commando half-section covering the northern part of South Vaagsø, the hamlet which was being cleared of its German garrison by the rest of the assault force.

Typically, a landlady would charge 1 pound ten shillings (the equivalent of £1.50) a week for providing board and lodgings, and while this may seem low now, in 1940, when the average manual worker earned £5 a week, it proved a useful boost to a household's income. With their larger allowances, officers sometimes boarded in local hotels or inns and, as there was no formal officer's mess, the hotel bar often took on the guise of one. In most cases the soldiers paid a little extra to their landladies in return for washing and ironing, or even polishing boots and brasswork. In return the household had to put up with their Commandos coming home wet and exhausted day after day. They also kept their weapons with them, so landladies became used to grenades set on mantelpieces and rifles propped in the corner.

The daily subsistence allowance was 6 shillings and 8 pence (the equivalent of 33 pence) for all ranks apart from officers, who received 13 shillings and 4 pence (66 pence). These two bands were issued at a fixed rate, regardless of rank – a regimental sergeant major received the same as an ordinary Commando private, and the commanding officer was awarded the same as a second lieutenant. The allowance remained the same

throughout the war, but as prices were controlled and food prices subsidized this proved reasonably adequate. The ration card was used by the landlady to purchase basic foods such as meat, tea, dairy products or sugar for her lodger, which were then used to prepare meals for him. Bread, milk, potatoes and cereals were not rationed, and so remained reasonably plentiful. When they could, the ration was augmented by items in short supply, such as eggs, chicken, sausages and pies. As the Commando was often away from his lodgings all day while training, a packed lunch of sandwiches was usually provided for him. Today the wartime ration allowance seems pitifully meagre, particularly given the intense physical activity these young men were expected to undertake. They might well have fared better being catered for in barracks, but the freedom this barrack-free system allowed them more than outweighed any minor disadvantages.

The lodging arrangements were always left up to the individual to organize. All a Commando's officers required was that he reported when and where he was required, and in good order, and that he was fully prepared for whatever was expected of him. It was up to him to find out where he had to report and in what uniform. There were numerous instances where men discovered their next parade was to be held the following morning some considerable distance away. This forced the men to organize themselves and march to the assembly point under their own initiative. As a system it was perfect for developing both self-reliance and a sense of unit spirit. This domestic arrangement proved extremely effective and was repeated whenever the Commando unit moved to another location.



British Commandos pictured on the docks of Newhaven in August 1942 after returning from the Dieppe raid. Although tired, the men are celebrating striking a blow against the Germans. While Operation *Jubilee* might have been a disaster, the men of Nos. 3 and 4 Commando acquitted themselves well during the operation.

The subsistence allowance was stopped only when the men were sent to a barracks or transit camp and fed by the army, when they went to the military hospital or on board a ship, and when they went overseas. The same budget was also used to provide money for transport if required (although train tickets were issued when appropriate) and for any non-military needs such as the purchase and repair of civilian clothing or domestic items. In the Middle East, Commandos lacked access to the same domestic arrangements found in Britain. So, Commandos were established in tented camps in the Egyptian countryside and messed communally. However, even here the emphasis was on training rather than camp routine, and distracting routines were kept to a minimum.

Sometimes, when Commando units were on lengthy exercises they set up bivouacs and still used their civilian-style rations. A cookhouse was created and a cook appointed. His job was to cook a decent meal for all at midday. The rest of the meals each day were the responsibility of each man, or rather each pair of men. In fact this system was used regularly when the Commandos were operating from temporary camps or bivouacs, both during training exercises and in the field. When in ships, though, hot meals were served navy fashion, while in the field either the field service ration or the composite ration pack

was issued. In the first, material for hot meals was provided – fresh, frozen or dehydrated – which was then prepared by the men. The meals were augmented, where possible, by fresh bread. Composite rations came in a wooden crate and served 14 men for one day. Seven basic menus were provided, one for each day of the week, as well as boiled sweets, biscuits, chocolate and canned fruit.

None of these catering options was of much use during a raid, or for the first days of a larger-scale invasion, before support facilities could be landed. In these cases the Commandos were issued with a 24-hour ration pack, a lightweight and high-energy giving selection, which came in a small cardboard box. Two were usually issued per man and were carried inside a mess tin stowed in the man's haversack. The pack contained dehydrated meat, porridge, biscuits, chocolate, meat broth, sugar, tea, dehydrated milk and salt, as well as four sheets of toilet paper. The meat and the broth could be heated on a small portable heater, using fuel tablets, which burned steadily when lit. Both on exercise and in the field, rations were often augmented by foraging. This covered anything from the covert stealing of a farmer's chickens to fishing, poaching or hunting rabbits. While this was officially discouraged, officers and NCOs tended to turn a blind eye to such proceedings. After all, during a raid Commandos were expected to be able to live off the land if they had to, and this meant they had to be able to forage for food. While this might have been the bane of local farmers, whose eggs and even poultry might disappear overnight, the founders of the Commandos wanted their men to function in unforeseen circumstances, when there wouldn't be a regular supply organization available to keep them provided for in the field.



Private Tom McCormack of No. 2 Commando received a severe head wound during the attack on St Nazaire. After being taken prisoner the young Commando, dazed and bleeding from his injury, was captured by a German army photographer from *Signal* magazine. He died shortly afterwards before any attempt was made to treat his wound.

The two-man pairing for cooking meals reflected the importance of the 'me and my pal' system. Two Commandos in the same section were paired off and shared basic tasks such as cooking, constructing bivouacs, and even supporting each other in a fight. The system wasn't new and had been first introduced among scouting troops in 1900 during the Boer War, but it worked well as the men looked out for each other, whether on the obstacle course, in a bar fight or under fire. When the Royal Marines formed additional Commandos they used a similar system, but the 'pal' was described as an 'oppo', from the term opposite number – the person who was on watch while you are asleep. 'At night in the field, one man built the bivvy, while his pal got cracking on the grub.' Your pal was supposed to look out for you, and in the case of LMG teams this pairing became a valuable operational necessity, as the two men were inseparable when in combat. It was an efficient system, and worked well both in action and out of it.

The creators of the Commandos effectively rejected military convention when they set up their own system of lodging, catering and training. In doing so they created an environment which nurtured self-reliance, independence and creativity – none of which were traits which were generally expected of the regular British soldier. The idea was that

the Commandos were a unit apart, and were expected to function perfectly well without being told what to do all the time. This of course required men with the independence of mind, initiative and training to be able to live off the land quite happily, whether they were on exercise in the Scottish Highlands or trudging through the jungles of Burma.

ON CAMPAIGN

All this training was certainly needed to turn the Commando volunteers into first-class fighting soldiers. Still, nothing was quite as effective at welding a Commando unit together as actually taking part in operations against the enemy. However, the very nature of the Commando mission meant that for the most part raids were of very short duration. So, men spent very little time operating under campaign conditions, unless their Commando formed part of a larger, longer operation such as the campaign in North Africa, the invasion of Sicily or Italy, or the campaign in North-West Europe. At least until 1943, training was the norm interspersed with short frenzied periods of action. It was only after the Allies began their large-scale amphibious landings in the Mediterranean that most Commandos spent more than a few days in active campaign conditions. The exceptions, of course, were the Middle East Commandos, who when not engaged in amphibious raiding expeditions played their part in both the fight for North Africa and the fighting withdrawal from Crete.



A non-commissioned officer of No. 1 Commando, photographed while his troop was carrying out mountain warfare training in Glencoe in November 1941. He wears minimal equipment over his battledress, but carries a Thompson machine carbine slung over his shoulder.

The first raids – Operations *Blue Collar* and *Ambassador* – demonstrated the need for training and preparation. As Lieutenant (later Brigadier) Peter Young pointed out when describing the Guernsey raid, the crash boats used to land the raiders were unsuitably noisy, knowledge of the area was minimal, and the inexperienced Commandos and Independent Company men made a string of basic mistakes, such as accidentally discharging their weapons, capsizing boats and selecting men who couldn't swim for the operation. Churchill dubbed these raids 'a silly fiasco', and they certainly highlighted the need for thorough training and preparation before the launch of another such operation.

The raid also led to a reorganization of the Commandos, which took place in early 1941. Now, a Commando consisted of six rather than ten troops, each with a full establishment of three officers and 62 men. Middle East (ME) Commandos had three troops, but they were double sized. The advantage of this new troop size was that the Commando headquarters could more easily control a force of six troops during a raid – the ten-troop force had proved itself too unwieldy. Just as importantly, as new assault landing craft became available, it was found that one troop could fit neatly into two craft. Within a month the new arrangement was put to the test when on 4 March Nos. 3 and 4 Commandos raided the Lofoten Islands supported by a naval covering force. The journey north from Scapa Flow was an uncomfortable one. One Marine recalled ‘The ship did everything but turn upside down, and I am sure that everyone was seasick, even the Captain’. For those who wanted a taste of action Operation *Claymore* was a disappointment, as the landing was unopposed.



Commandos training with the Fairbairn-Sykes commando knife. The instructors, coached by Captains Fairbairn and Sykes of the Shanghai Municipal Police, trained the Commandos to stab their victims' necks if possible, severing the carotid artery. If done correctly, the victim would be dead within 12 seconds.

The men lacked cold-weather clothing and so used their gas capes as both camouflage and protection from the elements. They approached the hotel where the German garrison were quartered; L/ Cpl. Ken Phillott of No. 4 Commando recalled:



At the Commando Basic Training Centre at Achnacarry, pyrotechnics were used to enhance training. In this photograph, explosive charges in the water beside this assault course obstacle simulate falling enemy mortar rounds. Nissen hut classrooms can be seen in the background.

‘We had been told to shoot anyone seen leaving by that particular door. I say shoot but we were so cold that we could hardly hold our rifles, let alone pull the trigger. In fact the only shots fired were in the room occupied by two German propaganda ministry officials. They were asleep when a commando shot off their door lock, then shot their chamber pot for good measure.’ The raid was not without its highlights. Lacking transport, Lord Lovat of No. 4 Commando took a bus to the island’s German seaplane base to accept its surrender. The men burned what they could, including a glycerine factory, rounded up their 225 German prisoners and 60 Norwegian collaborators and re-embarked. The raid achieved little concrete, but for the men it made the next operation a little easier.

Unsurprisingly, when the Commandos left Scapa Flow in December to carry out Operation *Archery* – the raid on Vaagsø – the transporting flotilla ran into another bad storm and was forced to seek shelter in Shetland. In fact, seasickness was an issue that dogged the Commandos throughout the war. No amount of boating and seamanship could prepare them for a winter storm in the Norwegian Sea, or a sudden gale-force sirocco in the Mediterranean. Even on D-Day, Bryan Samain of No. 45 (RM) Commando recalled: ‘The sea was choppy in the English Channel. A vast armada of invasion craft battled unceasingly against the relentless swell, swaying and rocking as they strove to keep in line ahead, and reach their objective. On board the craft the men tried to ease their aching, cramped limbs. They had been at sea for some hours now, and their faces were drawn with pain as they fought back the contents of their bellies, which threatened to retch up at any minute.’



In this exercise, Commandos are simulating a rapid advance, charging forward under the cover of a hastily laid smokescreen. In an opposed landing, the Commandos were most vulnerable when they were grouped together after reaching the beach. Charging forward towards the nearest available cover – or an enemy defensive position – was meant to reduce their exposure to enemy fire.

Transport on board a larger landing ship was almost equally as uncomfortable. For instance, the cargo ship *SS Glengyle* was requisitioned, hastily converted into an Infantry Landing Ship (Large) and renamed *HMS Glengyle*. She and her sisters could carry almost 700 men and ten assault landing craft (LCAs), but they were cramped and singularly uncomfortable. So much so, in fact, that the Commandos dubbed her the *Altmark* after the *Graf Spee*'s prison ship. The *Glengyle* transported the Commando dubbed Layforce to the Mediterranean, and later in the war she also transported the 3rd Commando Brigade from Ceylon to Hong Kong. Each Commando section was split into groups of eight men to form a mess. Their living space centred around a wooden table and two benches. At night these were stowed away and hammocks slung. These took some getting used to, but most men found them surprisingly comfortable. Each morning, on the order lash up and stow they were packed away again and the table erected. The system hadn't changed since the days of Nelson.



A Commando sub-section of ten men pulling their Assault Boat Mk III – or Goatley boat – ashore. Side ropes were also attached to the wooden gunwale, allowing it to be carried fairly easily. This fragile but useful craft was propelled using short paddles and a longer steering oar.

Each mess appointed a cook, who, when ordered, would collect the mess food from the galley along with a bucket of tea. This would then be distributed and eaten at the mess table. A troop diary in No. 4 Commando recorded 'Food on board was not good, and in fact some of the best appreciated meals were just plain bully beef and navy biscuits (hard tack), with a mug of tea.' When the ship was in transit the men would exercise the best they could on deck, practise clambering in and out of the LCAs, and practise small arms fire. They would also enjoy what fresh air they could before being sent back to their often fetid mess deck. There were other teething problems too, including meals served later than arranged, which upset the carefully arranged training schedules on board. This though, was largely due to inexperience in inter-service co-operation, and the situation improved as the war progressed. Incidentally, Commandos transported in regular warships – even battleships – had nothing but praise for the way they were looked after.

Once the Commandos got into action – especially one that lasted more than a day or so – they quickly settled into the routine of the campaign in which they were playing their part. Bivouacs were established, patrols sent out, and the unit made its mark. For instance, during the British East African campaign of 1941, No. 52 (ME) Commando was attached to the 9th Indian Brigade and set up a camp near the Sudanese village of Gallabat. It began an active programme of patrols and reconnaissance, both to discover what it could about the Italian defences and also to unsettle the defenders. David Smiley, a troop commander,

recalled one such patrol:

On the night of January 19th we marched down the banks of the Atbara River to Knor Kumsa, about 15 miles from the Eytie lines. We then lay up all day, and went again at night. What followed was typical of these East African patrols.

We crept past several camps, and even through the middle of a mule convoy. Eyties were singing, the sentries idle, and we even heard women's voices... We blundered onto the road sooner than we expected, and just as a supply convoy was coming down it.



Men of No. 43 (RM) Commando in action near Lake Commachio in Italy during the fighting there in April 1945. This lagoon bordering the Adriatic coast was the scene of heavy fighting for the men of two Royal Marine and two Army Commandos.

The convoy was duly shot up, but the firing alerted the Italians to the patrol's presence:

We crept back past the same camps – this time challenged by sentries in all directions. We fired on them and were fired on in return... We marched by compass all through the night and hit the river at about first light.

The patrol had lost two men killed and one missing – a high price for what had been achieved. Still, the result was to dramatically increase Italian nervousness, and to lower the enemy's morale.

Patrols of this kind continued for the best part of a month, until the British finally captured Gallabat, and drove on into Ethiopia.

In May 1941, Layforce was sent to reinforce the British garrison on Crete, but on landing was told that the Commonwealth troops there were in retreat and the island was being evacuated. The news was ignored and the Commandos disembarked. Brigadier Laycock decided to set up a blocking position in the hills, covering the line of retreat towards the island's south coast. Major Fred Graham remembers his briefing from Laycock. After being told of the mission, the Commando brigadier added 'Well Freddie, you better get off now, as it's a good long hike, and it looks as if it's all uphill. Use your discretion about dispositions and administration when you get there – Good Night.' That was it. Graham and his men gathered what ammunition and supplies they could and set off up the winding hilly road, as retreating troops streamed past them – Graham described them as a 'disorganized rabble'. No. 7 and 50/552 (ME) Commandos (temporarily renamed A and D Companies) took up their assigned positions before dawn and held their ground in the face of the expected German attack.



A Commando pictured on his return home to Hastings after taking part in a cross-channel raid in early June 1942. He is pictured carrying his naval issue lifejacket, with an army issue blanket draped around his shoulder and his Thompson machine carbine slung from his shoulder.

Then, at 9.00pm the following evening, the order came to withdraw. Graham continues, 'Then began the weary march across the mountains to the Sphakia assembly areas in a deep gully.' There, they were told to form the final rearguard around the evacuation

beaches. They had written orders to surrender and in the chaos of the final stages of the evacuation the order to withdraw never came. One young D Company officer was Arthur Darby. He recalled the scene after they were left behind: 'One young officer nearby was in tears, not for himself but for his men. I smashed my tommy gun against the rocks in a fury of disgust. I was 25 years of age, and four years of my youth were to be wasted in POW camps.' The young officer's anguish was understandable. No. 50 (ME) Commando contained a number of Spanish volunteers – men who had fought for the Republic during the Spanish Civil War. They had proved excellent soldiers, but they now feared that the Germans would shoot them as suspected communists. For the most part their fears turned out to be justified.



Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Young, commander of No. 3 Commando, briefing a pair of Commando snipers near Breville during the fighting on the left flank of the British beachhead in Normandy. The snipers are dressed in their regular uniform, augmented by improvised smocks capes and scrim netting face veils.

Operations lasting more than a few hours or days were rare until Sicily, Italy and

Normandy. This meant that, until then, there was little need to remain in action for more than a few hours. The need to conduct much longer operations demanded a new set of skills – the holding of a night perimeter for instance, or the digging of defensive positions. Commandos like Bryan Samain of No. 45 (RM) Commando described the campaign routine of digging slit trenches (slitters), a task performed with equal enthusiasm by Commandos in Sicily, and outside Salerno. He wrote:

It was true that we had not been in Normandy very long – just a matter of hours in fact. But we had already realized the value of digging. One of our men once said that all a soldier needed when he got into action was a bloody good rifle and a bloody good shovel, which turned out to be true enough. Our men knew how to dig too. They had done so many times during the past four years on exercises. One marine was known as Digger Jordan, as, when things started and the order came to dig, Digger would always be the first down in a comfortable slit trench. His record was 15 minutes – soft soil of course.

Samain and his companions spent their first night in France in these slitters.

Once a position was established, and patrols had been sent out, casualties became all but inevitable. That presented the problem of how to evacuate them, particularly when under random mortar or artillery fire. In No. 45 (RM) Commando ambulances were on hand to evacuate the wounded to the casualty station at Le Plein, and a Commando guided the drivers through the intertwined front lines, accompanied by four willing German prisoners. Samain describes one such evacuation, typical of so many from the front line throughout the war:

The eight casualties and one very badly wounded German prisoner were therefore loaded into the two ambulances. This involved a stretcher party across a much-sniped orchard... but was successfully accomplished under the protection of the Red Cross flag. The Germans, rather surprisingly, respected the flag when they saw it on this occasion, although this was not always the case... the ambulances drove south for Le Plein, but only just in time, for the barn where the loading took place was set on fire five minutes later.



Royal Marine Commandos of the 1st Special Service Brigade moving inland after landing on Sword Beach on D-Day (6 June 1944). Both Nos. 41 and 45 (RM) Commandos landed there at H+90 minutes (90 minutes behind the initial landing wave).

Despite the efforts of the Commando guide, the ambulances were captured by the Germans, and the wounded landed up in a German rather than a British casualty station that day.



A patrol of men from 45 (RM) Commando, part of the 1st Commando Brigade, is pictured moving through the ruins of the German town of Wesel on the eastern side of the Rhine. The town was captured during Operation *Plunder*, the Rhine Crossings of March 1945. Note that the men are wearing smocks rather than battledress.

These little instances are typical of the events that took place on campaign during the longer operations conducted by the Commandos. However, passively holding defensive lines or forming part of a larger conventional operation was not really what they had been trained or equipped to do. They were raiders, and most of the time the Commandos lacked the support elements available to their infantry equivalents. While superbly trained soldiers, their skills were rather wasted conducting patrols and holding the line. They were certainly wasted when the Commandos were left behind as they had been at Crete. Above all else, the Commandos had been set up as Churchill's 'hand of steel', and were superbly trained for a more aggressive style of fighting, whether a hit-and-run raid, acting as the hardened spearhead of an invasion force or serving as shock troops in a larger set-piece battle. The Commandos would be called on to carry out all of these missions before the war ran its course.

D THE DEMOLITION OF A GUN BATTERY ON MAALOY ISLAND, VAAGSØ RAID, 1941



On the morning of 27 December 1941, 500 men from Nos. 3 and 4 Commandos carried out the first large-scale raid of the war – an attack on the Norwegian island of Vaagsø. While the Royal Navy bombarded the local defences, the Commandos moved towards their objectives – the hamlet of South Vaagsø and the gun battery on the small island of Maaloy. Two troops landed on Maaloy and swept through the island, encountering surprisingly little resistance. Once the island was secured the raiders set about destroying the German gun battery there, which consisted of four old 105mm guns set in 19th-century stone emplacements. Here the demolition party is setting charges while in the background Major Jack Churchill is using his radioman to send an update to the force headquarters. The smoke in the background comes from the burning barracks and stores on the island.

BELIEF AND BELONGING

From the start, the Commandos were regarded as an elite force. They were an all volunteer force, until the Royal Marines joined them, and volunteers were sifted and selected to include experienced soldiers who had already proven their worth in more conventional units, or who showed the characteristics and potential the Commando founders wanted. The Combined Operations Command who supervised their creation and operation declared that the amphibious guerrilla warfare which lay at the heart of the Commando's mission: 'Operating on the sea, from small boats, was something the British excelled at – something to which they were, by temperament and tradition, particularly suited'. This might have been mere hyperbole, but with the right leadership and planning these raids proved a resounding success.

While the German Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels might dismiss them as mere Red Indian Raids, these operations achieved two very important things. First, they proved a marvellous boost for British morale at a time when there seemed little to be cheerful about. While the first raids were mere pinpricks that did little to diminish the German capacity to wage war, these were merely the start of a series of amphibious operations that led relentlessly towards the invasion of North Africa, Sicily, Italy and eventually France. While at first the British military establishment might have resented the presence of these new units, and were unsure how best to employ them, through their achievements, the Commandos demonstrated their worth and pioneered the skills that would ultimately bear fruit on D-Day.

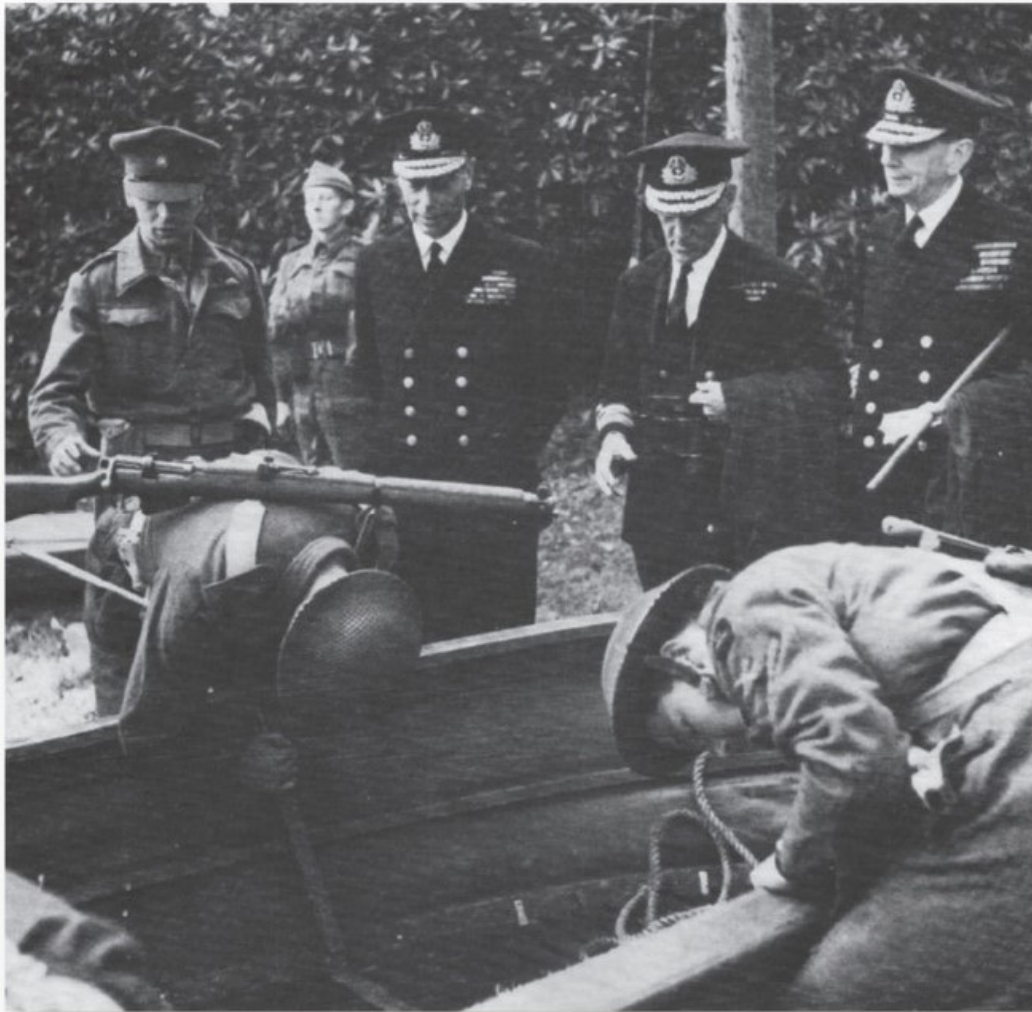


Men of the 1st Commando Brigade pictured maintaining a defensive position in the centre of Osnabrück in Lower Saxony on 4 April 1945. Although the Germans offered relatively little resistance during the capture of the bomb-damaged city, tensions remained high there for several days because of the presence of diehard Nazi elements in the area.

These skills and this professional expertise was developed the hard way – through years of training, and through a number of ‘blooding’ actions in smaller raids on the French coast, and in the Mediterranean. This professionalism was based on three things. First, every volunteer had already undergone basic military training, and was familiar with the battlefield skills expected of him. The volunteers selected for the Commandos were those who showed particular aptitude in these skills, or who displayed sufficient initiative to warrant further training. Second, each Commando operation was analysed after the mission was finished, and any lessons that needed to be learned were applied, based on actual combat experience. Finally, Commandos had the pick of any available equipment, so they had the tools needed to perform their mission as effectively as possible.

This concept of ‘lessons learned’ proved the key to Commando professionalism. Unlike regular army units, who saw action less frequently – if at all – commandos were able to learn empirically, and so their tactical and professional skills increased as the war continued. For example, in a document entitled *Lessons Learned in Combined Operations* (1943), the Combined Operations Directorate produced a checklist for use in the planning of future commando raids, or even larger-scale operations (e.g. Operations *Husky*, *Avalanche* and *Overlord*). On a strategic level it recommended avoiding planning involving a wide range of military services – instead concentrating naval, army and air force support under Combined Operations control. Training should be carried out on similar terrain or beaches to those to be encountered in the raid, and alternate landing sites

should be selected in case circumstances dictated a sudden change of plan. Above all, detailed intelligence of the objective was deemed essential.



King George VI, accompanied by Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, watch as Commandos demonstrate the preparation of an Assault Boat Mk III in August 1941. The royal inspection of Commando facilities was timed to coincide with a large-scale exercise conducted on Loch Fyne near Inveraray.

At the operational level it recommended the use of light artillery in any long-range strike inland, the use of other heavy weapons, and the provision of air support. Tactically, it emphasized the use of smoke, surprise, fire and movement and the deployment of Commandos for special pre-planned missions, rather than their use as mere supports for a larger operation. They should wear 'a light variation of fighting order', and even went so far as to recommend using blackened bayonets, identifying signs and the wearing of berets rather than steel helmets. These guidelines, based on the empirical lessons of dozens of earlier raids, helped ensure that the Commandos were given every chance of success in their mission.

The result of this caucus of experience, as well as the honing of skills over years of training, produced soldiers with a pride in their own abilities, and a unit *esprit de corps*. This was summed up perfectly by Captain Denis O'Flaherty, who had been severely wounded during the Vaagsø raid in late 1941, and spent two years in hospital. When he rejoined his old unit, he noticed a big difference: 'One thing that is clear to me is that 1 Commando Brigade, by 1944, was a very fine professional setup, with command, control

and tactical know-how far ahead of the ordinary infantry, and far advanced from the good old days of 1941. At the same time, and quite rightly, they had lost the blind dash that I thought was so remarkable in the minority who were actually engaged at close quarters at Vaagsø. I have never seen that equalled in any army since.'



The Commodore, Combined Operations, Lord Louis Mountbatten welcoming home the Vaagsø raiders on board the troopship *HMS Prince Leopold* on 29 December 1941, the day after the Commandos returned to Scapa Flow. This raid proved the value of well-planned Commando operations, and secured Mountbatten's position as the new head of Combined Operations.

This professionalism wasn't achieved by issuing distinctive green berets, or special uniforms and badges. These were adopted more as a result of the lessons learned during past operations than through the need to create some form of collective unit identity. It was clear that Commandos knew they were special – a cut above all other soldiers – not by any false sense of pride, indeed modesty was considered a virtue in the Commandos, but through years of perseverance, rigorous training and learning from previous missions. By 1944, those who didn't make the grade had been 'Returned to Unit', leaving a professional, hardened body of troops who could be utterly relied upon to do their job with quiet efficiency.



A two-man Folbot Canoe, or Cockle Mark I, the forerunner of the more successful Cockle Mark II which was used to great effect during the Bordeaux Raid of December 1942. The Folbot Company, founded in 1933, made canvas and wood folding boats for the British leisure market. When the war began these were adopted by the Commandos for use in small-scale raids.



A Cockle Mark II, together with a number of rubber dinghies and paddles, being prepared for storage in a local coastal craft, before being taken on a small-scale Commando raid in the Mediterranean in 1942. Numerous raids of this kind were conducted in the Aegean, the Adriatic and along the North African coast during this period.

E COMMANDO RAIDERS LANDING FROM A GOATLEY BOAT, LOCH LOCHY, 1943



Designed by Fred Goatley, a marine designer who worked for Saunders-Roe Ltd, a British engineering company based on the Isle of Wight, the Goatley boat, or Assault Boat Mk III, was 15ft long and could, at a pinch, hold a raiding party of ten men. It was built from wood and canvas and was ingeniously designed so when it was collapsed it was just 4 inches high. In this scene, a raiding party is shown disembarking from one of these boats during a training exercise on Loch Lochy. It was here that the Commandos conducted most of their boat training, and carried out 'opposed landings'.

Back in August 1940, the War Office said of the Commandos:

The creation of such a force calls for the highest standards of training, personal and collective discipline, courage, skill, determination and imagination in all ranks – backed up by inspired leadership and organising ability on the part of their commanders.

It continued:

Training will therefore aim at producing:

- a.) A very highly developed team spirit and esprit de corps;
- b.) Self-reliance and resourcefulness on the part of each individual.

It is the greatest mistake to suppose that these two aims are incompatible, and every Commando leader must foster a collective spirit as well as a spirit of individualism in his Commando.



A raiding party made up of men from No. 6 Commando are pictured disembarking from an Assault Landing Craft near Hastings after a raid on the French Channel coast in early June 1942. The raid, codenamed *Operation Bristle*, was carried out against German coastal installations at St Cecily Plage near Le Touquet.

This helps explain their success. Unlike other so-called elite forces banded together by fighting skills, idealism, superior equipment, background or blind obedience, the Commando was expected to think for himself, and to make sure that he knew exactly what was expected of him when the moment came. He could rely on his pals to do the same – men with the skills to do just about anything that was required of them on the modern battlefield, but with the brains to pre-empt orders by thinking for themselves.

An early example of this was provided by the Dieppe raid of 19 August 1942, where the attack on the Hess battery near Varengeville was planned in great detail involving two

groups, but inevitably elements of the plan went awry. The gunners were pinned down by a three-man sniper team, which included LCpl. Mann. Working on his own he picked off the German gunners so effectively that the battery was unable to fire on the main landing beaches in front of Dieppe. His initiative probably saved the lives of many Canadian soldiers. He was soon joined by LSgt. McCarthy commanding a Bren gun group, who pinned down the enemy so effectively that the rest of No. 4 Commando were able to work their way round the battery and attack it from the rear. Both men received the Military Medal for their actions – and their initiative.

Before that main assault, a trooper climbed a telegraph pole to cut the enemy telephone wires, which meant the defenders of Battery Hess couldn't call for reinforcements. The rest advanced using fire and movement and covering smoke, and used grenades, bayonets and Tommy guns to overcome the defenders. In the attack NCOs found themselves commanding whole Commando troops as their officers were wounded, and were able to keep the assaulting force moving until the battery was taken. In the after-action report, the initiative of NCOs and troopers, the high morale of the men, their own confidence in their abilities and those of their comrades, thorough preparation and training, and a complete understanding of small-unit tactics all made this a classic operation – one which was later studied as a 'textbook' assault on an enemy gun position.

All through Commando training, and throughout the war, self-reliance and independence of mind were encouraged, not at the expense of responsibility or a drop in discipline, but by encouraging a very high level of professional skill and physical fitness so that men could undertake just about anything, mixed with an open-mindedness and initiative which allowed the Commando to cope well with whatever challenge or setback was thrown at him. A belief in the individual, a belief in the team and belief in the Commando's leaders all combined to create a soldier who could be relied upon to do his job with consummate professionalism.



A patrol from No. 9 Commando displaying one of the 28 German prisoners captured during Operation *Partridge* – a raid across the Garigliano River in Italy on 29–30 December 1943. The operation was designed as a diversion, to persuade the Germans that a major assault was expected in that sector of the front line.

Mere bravery and toughness weren't enough to be a commando. These were expected, but they were tempered with the ability of a soldier to read the battlefield and be aggressive, but to do so with a high level of tactical skill, which ensured the enemy was killed rather than the Commandos attacking them. From the beginning an offensive spirit was fostered in the commandos. They were taught to defeat the enemy through their superior training and tactical skill, always to get their man, and while raiding they were encouraged to wreak as much destruction as possible, to make their attack as devastatingly effective as possible. Certainly, aggressiveness led to a high number of casualties; of the 28,000 British Commandos who served during the war, over 1,700 Commandos died in action. However, the wartime Commandos managed to accrue an impressive number of victories. In short, the Commandos were the war's first true Special Forces, and they thoroughly lived up to the title. They knew they were good, and rather than brag about their achievements they let their record speak for itself.

F ROYAL MARINE COMMANDOS ADVANCING INLAND FROM SWORD BEACH, D-DAY, 1944



After landing on Sword Beach on D-Day, No. 45 (RM) Commando rendezvoused with the rest of the 1st Special Service Brigade and then headed west to link up with the British Airborne troops holding Pegasus Bridge. Once across the river Orne, 45 (RM) Commando was sent north to Sallenelles where the river entered the English Channel. From there it marched west towards the village of Merville where a coastal battery was located. This shows a half-section of Charlie Troop – the advance guard of the Commando – moving up the road between Sallenelles and Merville. At this point, the nearest Germans were about half a mile ahead at the battery, and so the Commandos advanced cautiously, but without having to make use of cover. In a few minutes they would be halted then given the orders that would lead to their attack on Merville village.

EXPERIENCE OF BATTLE

The aim of this chapter is not to describe all the battles Commandos fought in during the war – that would fill several volumes – but to capture something of what battle was like for these young and well-trained Commandos, and to show how they functioned under fire. So, five operations have been selected – the Vaagsø Raid (1941), the Dieppe raid (1942), operations in Italy (1943), the Normandy campaign (1944), and the Arakan campaign in Burma (1945), allowing us to see what happened on the battlefield, and how – if at all – the Commandos' experience of battle changed as the war went on. For the sake of proportion, two feature the exploits of Army Commandos, and a third follows the activity of Royal Marine Commandos. While two more operations involve both types of Commando. Of course, Commandos fought in every theatre of war, from the mountains of Ethiopia to the jungles of Burma, and from the snowy fjords of Norway to the sun-drenched Greek islands. The Commandos' battle honours list 38 campaigns and engagements, so these five merely provide a flavour of a wide range of battles where the Commandos put their training into practice.



The Storm Boat – a rig-hulled 18ft dory – had a flat transom designed to house an outboard motor. The craft pictured here was operated by the 2nd Commando Brigade during its operations on Lake Commachio in Italy, April 1945. In some cases where the glutinous mud bordering the lagoon prevented deployment of heavy weapons, several storm boats were lashed together to create a larger more stable fighting platform.

Vaagsø

Operation *Archery*, a raid on a German-occupied harbour of Vaagsø in central Norway by men of Nos. 2 and 3 Commando, was launched on 27 December 1941. The aim was to disrupt German fish oil production, but its most important aspect was to serve as a 'bleeding' of two Commando formations. These Commandos landed at five sites in the area, the most important being the small island of Malloy, where a coastal battery was located, covering the approaches to the hamlet of South Vaagsø. The hamlet consisted of a single street, with a line of warehouses and fish factories lining the shore of a fjord to the east, and a steep hill to the west. At first, three troops were landed to sweep through the

town, but as resistance mounted extra troops were brought in to help finish the job.

Stiff opposition was encountered in the hamlet, both from German soldiers in the buildings and from snipers hiding on the hillside overlooking the town. Each house had to be cleared as the Commandos worked their way northwards. Bren teams covered the sides of the buildings and the street, while rifle groups stormed each building, using grenades and small arms. This account by Colonel Durnford-Slater captures something of the ferocity of the fight:

[Capt.] Algy Forrester went off like a rocket with his No. 4 troop down the street of the town, leaving a trail of dead Germans behind him... Algy wading in, shouting and cheering his men, throwing grenades into each house as they came to it and firing from the hip with his Tommy gun. He led an assault on the German headquarters in the Ulversund Hotel, and was about to toss a grenade in when one of the enemy, firing through the front door, shot him. As he fell he landed on his grenade, which exploded a second later.

A corporal, Knocker White, took charge, and finished the clearing of the hotel, killing 14 more Germans in the process.

Captain Peter Young, officer commanding 6 Troop of No. 3 Commando, was sent in as part of the reinforcements, and, together with Durnford-Slater, he surveyed the situation. Young described the scene:

The main road was obviously covered by enemy riflemen... to the left the snow-clad hillside at the back of the town looked forbidding. Not fifty yards away to the right was the icy fjord... I suggested that I should try and work forward along the waterfront... there would be cover among the warehouses... we rushed across in single file, running as fast as we could in the soft snow. We had not gone further through than the first of the dark high buildings when we ran into [Lieutenant] O Flaherty's party. In the first warehouse was a German lying dead, an unexploded stick grenade in one outstretched hand.

They had been lucky. Then came the task of working northwards through the houses and warehouses lining the shore. Young wrote:

O'Flaherty pointed out a yellow house in which he suspected were Germans. In street fighting it is extremely difficult to locate the enemy, and so as we got to a warehouse with a reasonable view I posted Lance Corporal Halls with a Bren in an upper window, from which he could cover our advance. There was a small building about twenty yards away to our left front, and this I made my next bound. We had to dash out through the door one at a time. There was no entrance on our side, and as I ran around the corner I saw Germans in the doorway. They vanished with the speed of light, and shouting 'Hände Hoch!' I edged up to the door. Sheraton, a dark well-built young soldier, on fire with excitement, pushed past me, and crouching in the doorway, emptied his Thompson into the building. This did the trick. Three Germans, one a sailor, and a Norwegian came out and surrendered. Things were going well – but not for long.

Then, a shot rang out and two sergeants were hit, one mortally. There was a sniper hiding somewhere. The Commandos couldn't see the firing position, so they raced on to the next building – a big red-painted warehouse. Young continues: 'Suddenly a smart-looking German in a long overcoat, steel helmet and equipment stepped into a doorway little more than ten yards away, and flung a stick grenade at me. It fell some ten feet to my right.' More grenades followed before the Commandos reached the warehouse, one of which fell at Young's feet but did not explode. The British began throwing their own Mills grenades and then entered the door. Young recalled: 'I was silhouetted in the doorway. Two shots flashed out from a point across the room to my right. I fired and sprang back into the open... A direct assault seemed unpromising, and I told the others that we must try and outflank the enemy. Easier said than done.'



Commandos of the 1st Special Service Brigade going ashore on Sword Beach on D-Day. The brigade landed on Sword Beach between La Brèche and Ouistreham, and, despite suffering casualties from enemy artillery and mortar fire, they disembarked and pressed inland with commendable speed.



Lieutenant-Colonel Jim Moulton, the commander of No. 48 (RM) Commando directs the fire of a Canadian Wolverine tank destroyer during the attack on German strongpoint W26 at Langrune-sur-Mer facing Sword Beach. The picture was taken in the late morning of 7 June, and the German strongpoint surrendered shortly afterwards. Beyond the Wolverine a disabled Centaur tank belonging to the Royal Marines Armoured Support Group can be seen.

Then, someone came up with the idea of burning the enemy out. A petrol can was thrown and ignited by a grenade. The wooden building caught on fire and, as two Germans ran from it, they were cut down by fire from a Bren gun. With that, resistance seemed to slacken and the Commandos continued their advance until the hamlet was cleared. All that remained now was some final mopping up, the demolition of fish oil stores and other installations – including the guns on Maaloy Island – and the evacuation of the raiding party. In all, the operation had cost the lives of 17 Commandos, plus a Norwegian liaison officer, while 53 were wounded. It was a tough little fight, but the Commandos had given a very good account of themselves. According to the after-action report the raid demonstrated the value of training, planning and inter-service cooperation. In fact, it also highlighted a number of weaknesses – the lack of tactical preparedness, poor air support, and unreliable battlefield communications being the most important. However, the aim of the report was to allow the commandos to learn from their mistakes. In theory the next operation should have been that much easier.

Dieppe

Unfortunately, the next big operation – the Dieppe raid – Operation *Jubilee* – suffered

from both poor planning and bad execution. Conceived as a major strike against enemy-occupied France, it involved both Commandos and regular Canadian troops, as well as naval and air support. Effectively it was a mini invasion, albeit one designed to carry out a very limited 'hit-and-run' operation. It was too large to be a successful hit and run raid, and yet too small to hold its objective in the face of a serious German counter-attack. The raid began on the morning of 19 August 1942 and involved the landing of a Canadian force of 5,000 men on the beaches in front of the town and either side of it. The German regiment dug in around the town held its ground, and most of the invaders were stopped on the beaches. Tanks bogged down in the shingle or were destroyed by anti-tank guns, and while a few groups of Canadians made it into Dieppe itself, overall the assault was halted and then thrown back into the sea. In the end, two-thirds of the Canadian invasion force were either killed, wounded or taken prisoner. Dieppe was a monumental failure. The only bright spot in the whole operation was the action of the Commandos.

The landing by the Canadians was supported by No. 3 Commando on the left (east) and No. 4 Commando on the right (west). Both Commandos landed at Orange Beach – at the base of steep cliffs. At Varengeville-sur-Mer, Lord Lovat's No. 4 Commando captured its objective, a battery of coastal defence guns, and killed 150 German defenders for the loss of 12 dead and 20 wounded, plus 13 more missing. For the attack, the Commando had divided into two groups and, while one engaged the battery frontally, pinning the defenders in a firefight, the other worked its way around it and then assaulted the battery from the rear. It was a textbook manoeuvre – one practised repeatedly during training – and it was carried out with skill and daring. It almost failed when Lovat's manoeuvre group ran into a party of German reinforcements in a farmyard, preparing to attack the Commando pinning group. The Germans were killed or driven off by a spirited assault using grenades, and the way was then clear to launch a full-scale attack on the rear of the German battery.



Commandos landing in the shallow tidal waters surrounding the Myebon Peninsula during the Arakan campaign, January 1945. Waterborne transport was the only practical way to move around this inhospitable region, but the water was also home to crocodiles and water snakes.

On approaching the rear of the battery the Germans opened fire as the commandos were cutting their way through the perimeter wire. Undeterred, the Commandos assaulted the enemy under cover of smoke and heavy supporting fire. The battle soon degenerated into a bitter struggle around the battery's buildings. In this hand-to-hand fight by the main assaulting force, Major Pat Porteous earned the Victoria Cross for his actions. His citation described what happened after Porteous was shot through the arm: 'Undaunted, Major Porteous closed with his assailant, succeeded in disarming him, and killed him with his own bayonet, thereby saving the life of a British sergeant on whom the German had turned his aim.' Porteous wasn't finished yet though.

The assault on the rear of the battery became bogged down by German fire as an officer and a troop sergeant major were killed. Major Porteous, as his citation read, 'without hesitation and in the face of a withering fire, dashed across the open ground to take command of this detachment'. Rallying them, he led them in a charge, which carried the German position at the point of a bayonet. He was wounded again, but refused to be led back to the beach until the German guns had been destroyed. This was a perfect example of the drive and offensive spirit instilled in the Commandos during training.

No. 3 Commando was less fortunate. On the way to Dieppe it encountered a German naval patrol in the English Channel, and only five assault landing craft made it past the Germans to complete their landing on Yellow Beach below Berneval-sur-Mer. Major Peter Young led 18 men up the cliff but lacked the strength to take the enemy gun battery which was his objective. Later, Young wrote about his part in the operation: 'We came in five minutes early, for it was getting light all too quickly, and touched down about 4.50am. We

crossed the narrow beach, reached the foot of the cliff, turned to the left and approached the gully. The narrow cleft in the cliffs was completely choked with coils of wire with a rabbit wire fence on the outside, some ten feet in front of it.' However, they managed to find a cleft to climb up, and reach the top of the cliff.



Royal Marine Commandos – probably men of No. 45 (RM) Commando – are shown moving off Sword Beach and heading towards the copse that served as the inland rallying point for the 1st Special Service Brigade. From there the Commandos would move east through Colleville towards Pegasus Bridge.

Young added: 'On reaching the top of the cliff, I could see the back of a notice board which turned out to have the words "Achtung Minen" written on it... By about 5.10am my whole party had reached the top, and I led them into a small wood nearby.' Young sent out scouts, then advanced towards the village, and the battery. 'When we came abreast of the church we were suddenly fired on by a German machine-gun post in the corner of the road, and about sixty yards ahead of us... a fire fight developed, until [Lieutenant] Selwyn put Lance-Corporal Bennett behind the church, and engaged this enemy post with our 2in. mortar. The German machine gun ceased fire.'

The advance on the battery resumed, and when the men were in position in a cornfield on its flank, Young ordered them to open fire. 'We had to fire from the kneeling position because of the height of the corn, taking snap shots and moving about, so as to offer the most difficult target to the enemy... I am very far from claiming we caused many casualties... it was a harassing fire, more or less controlled.' They were eventually rewarded when a gun turned round to shoot back at them – one gun that wasn't firing on the Canadians pinned down outside Dieppe. Eventually, with ammunition running low and no sign of other Commandos arriving to support him, Young ordered his men to withdraw.

While the Dieppe operation was a disaster, the Commandos performed very well,

particularly Lord Lovat and his men who captured their objective in such fine style. Despite the debacle, Dieppe served as a lesson for Allied planners in what not to do. This meant that when the Allies landed in France again, on D-Day, they would be much better prepared.

G ARMY COMMANDOS TAKING A BREAK DURING OPERATIONS IN SICILY, 1943



On 10 July 1943, No. 3 Commando landed near Cassibile in Sicily, a little south of the port of Syracuse. Three days later it re-embarked and was sent up the coast to land behind enemy lines at Agnone. No. 3 Commando was charged with capturing a vital bridge several miles inland, a feat it accomplished early on 14 July. As enemy pressure mounted, the Commando was forced to withdraw, and, after splitting into small groups, the men began making their way across the hills towards the British front line near Augusta. They were dogged by enemy patrols as they went, but eventually they joined up with the advance elements of the British Eighth Army. This scene shows a small group of Commandos taking a short rest break during the withdrawal. In the background the troop commanders – a lieutenant and a sergeant – consult their map and plan the next phase of the march.

Italy

Following the defeat of Axis forces in North Africa, the Allies launched an invasion of Sicily on 10 July 1943. Codenamed Operation *Husky*, the landing was spearheaded by four Commandos – Nos. 2 and 3 (Army), and 40 and 41 (RM) Commando. Their job was to secure the flanks of the main landing, and to secure strategic objectives farther inland. Then on 9 September, No. 2 (Army) and 41 (RM) Commando (together with the US Rangers) performed a similar role on the left flank of the Allied landings at Salerno, on the Italian mainland. Codenamed Operation *Avalanche*, this amphibious assault centred on the speedy capture of the port of Salerno, while the Commandos and Rangers secured the Sorrento Peninsula to the west, thereby blocking German reinforcements reaching the port from Naples.

The initial pre-dawn landing near the fishing village of Vietri was carried out by No. 2 Commando led by Col. Jack Churchill. The Germans were driven from the village, allowing Lt. Col. Lumsden's Royal Marine Commandos and Brigadier 'Lucky' Laycock's brigade headquarters to reinforce the bridgehead, then advance into the hills beyond. Their objective was the La Molina Pass, through which the Naples to Salerno road ran. They occupied the hills overlooking the pass and dug in. The following day the Germans skirmished with them, but no large-scale attack was launched. That came on 11 September, but the Commandos held their ground until relieved by regular infantry units. They were pulled back, but were sent back to the front line two days later, when the Hermann Göring Panzer Division attacked in force.

In the confused fighting that followed, No. 2 Commando was forced back from Dragonea Hill overlooking the pass, as the German counter-attack reached the outskirts of Vietri. Tom Churchill, Jack's younger brother, recalled a radio message from his older sibling. Jack said: 'Things are now a bit tricky up here. Enemy is coming forward under a rolling mortar barrage, and they've got through our lines at several places. Am still out of touch of my forward troops'. Tom, attached to Laycock's HQ, ordered immediate artillery support and organized a counter-attack. A company each from Nos. 2 and 41 Commandos went forward again, supported by American mortar fire. The hill was retaken but the Commandos suffered heavy casualties in the process. Officer casualties were particularly severe.



Men of No. 41 (RM) Commando advancing into Westkapelle during the Walcheren landings of November 1944. In the background the lighthouse, which dominated the coastal town can be seen; it was from there that sniper and machine-gun fire was directed against the attackers. Note that the Commandos are all wearing smocks rather than battledress.

This action was typical of the fighting around Salerno. If key positions were captured, the Commandos learned to expect vigorous German counter-attacks, which were followed by immediate counter-attacks of their own using aggressive fire and movement tactics, smoke and rolling artillery or mortar barrages. While the fighting around Salerno raged for another week, and the Commandos would see extensive action both near Vietri and Piegollette to the east, their ability to hold ground and to launch spirited counter-attacks proved vital to the survival of the British sector of the Allied bridgehead.



When they landed on Sword Beach near La Brèche on D-Day, No. 41 (RM) Commando suffered heavy casualties on landing, and for a while was pinned on the beach as the dunes beyond were cleared of both mines and the enemy. Here, Lieutenant Paddy Stevens (standing), commanding A Troop, takes the opportunity to address his men.

The Commandos in the Mediterranean theatre went on to see further service in the Adriatic, both on the Italian and the Albanian and Yugoslavian coasts. Commandos fought throughout the Italian campaign, but their most significant action came in the last months of the war, near Lake Comacchio. Four Commandos (Nos. 2, 9, 40 and 43) of the 2nd Commando Brigade took part in the hard-fought battle which led directly to the surrender of all German forces in Italy. During the fighting in Sicily, Italy and Yugoslavia the combination of spirited but well-planned assaults, and stubborn defensive tactics meant that the Commandos were a real boon to the Allies. These tactics would be repeated nine months later, when Commandos would take part in an even larger amphibious landing, followed by a long land campaign, this time in Normandy and North-West Europe.

Normandy

Inevitably, the Commandos were heavily involved in the landings in Normandy on D-Day, 6 June 1944. Effectively, they were to be the vanguard of the invasion – the steel tip of the Allied army. The 1st Special Service Brigade, commanded by Lord Lovat, was given the job of securing the left flank of the Allied beachhead. It consisted of Nos. 3, 4, 6 and 45 (RM) Commandos, while Nos. 41, 46, 47 and 48 (RM) Commandos also landed on D-Day operating in support of other landing forces.

After establishing themselves ashore on Sword Beach near Lion-sur-Mer, Lovat's men were ordered to cross the Canal de Caen and the river Orne, and to take up position on the extreme left flank of the beachhead. Here the story is taken up by Bryan Samain, of 45

(RM) Commando. His account provides us with an excellent flavour of the fighting on D-Day itself and also the days that followed. Here he describes the landing on Sword Beach, 90 minutes after the first wave (at H+90):

The bottoms of our craft scraped ominously over treacherous underwater obstacles of wire and concrete as we covered the last fifty yards. Suddenly, a German battery of anti-tank guns opened up on us from a flank. Through the haze of thick smoke and the deafening roar of the battery – firing at almost point-blank range – someone was trying to shout orders. Men were scrambling furiously to obey, but no sooner had they leaped to their feet than they seemed to crumple visibly, fumbling with dazed, frightened hands for tender wounds.

There was a thunderous splash as the craft beached on the edge of the wreckage-filled water, in most cases with still four or five feet of water forward. Everyone began to pile out now, a furious, desperate collection of men in green berets, white teeth grinning viciously across blackened faces. Holding their precious weapons high above their heads they waded ashore, the cold water coming up to their chests, enveloping their heavy rucksacks, the soft, silky sand giving little support to their struggling feet. The time was ten past nine in the morning. Forty-five Commando had landed.

Leaving their casualties behind them the Commandos raced up the beach, and continued inland to the brigade's assembly point – a wood 1,000 yards inland. No. 6 Commando was already there, and 45 (RM) Commando was soon joined by No. 3 Commando. The brigade moved on towards Colville to the east and then No. 6 Commando pushed on to Pegasus Bridge, followed by No. 2 Commando with the Royal Marines forming the reserve. On linking up with the 6th Airborne Division, Lord Lovat decided to push on over the canal bridge and the Orne bridge beyond. One of the few casualties during the crossing of the two bridges was Lt. Col. N.C. Reis, commanding No. 45 (RM) Commando, who was hit in the thigh, and evacuated back to the beachhead. The army commandos were sent to reinforce the airborne troops fighting near Amfreville, while 45 (RM) Commando headed north towards Merville. It passed Sallenelles, encountering fairly light opposition, and by late afternoon the Commandos were approaching Merville. The German coastal battery there was an important objective, but the order was to clear the village and then dig in.

The following day (D+1), the Marines were ordered to capture the next village, Franceville Plage, while part of No. 3 Commando assaulted the battery itself. On approaching the village, Charlie Troop peeled off and cleared a wood to the west of the village, while Baker and Easy Troops entered the outskirts. The main street was codenamed 'Piccadilly', and one troop advanced through the houses on each side of it. Samain described the attack: 'A strong German pillbox dominated the whole of Piccadilly, and was situated at the far end of the street. The two troops continued their advance towards it, with Able now following some distance behind.' A PIAT team was brought up to suppress the German strongpoint, but they were spotted and fired at. A minor battle commenced almost immediately, with everyone on both sides blazing away furiously at each other. An anti-tank gun fired down 'Piccadilly' and hit 45 (RM) Commando headquarters, while the unit's own mortars were now firing in an attempt to suppress the pillbox.

Then, 'Able Troop, which had been following Baker down "Piccadilly", suddenly came under intense fire from a hitherto-silent enemy strongpoint on the right flank [i.e. to the east of the village]. They immediately fanned out into the houses flanking the street and leap-frogged from one house to another, advancing without further opposition until they came up to some German dugouts on the extreme edge of the beaches to the north of the

town.’ By then it had become clear that the Germans were launching a major counter-attack from the east in an attempt to cut the Commandos off from the rest of the Allied bridgehead. ‘Major Nicol Gray, the acting commander of 45 (RM) Commando, immediately decided to fight his way out. Turning about we started to retreat down “Piccadilly”... a running fight ensued down the whole length of the main street, the Germans making frantic efforts to cut us off by moving their main attacking force down a parallel street to our left.’ The Commandos withdrew to a defensive perimeter near Merville. So ended their second day in Normandy.

It turned out No. 45 Commando had been attacked by elements of two enemy *Kampfgruppen* from the German 711st Infantry Division, whose orders had been to support the Merville Battery. It was little wonder that the Commandos were forced out of Franceville-Plage. Both sides had taken casualties, and both were now both exhausted and short of ammunition. The Royal Marine commandos held their positions near Merville for another day before moving south to join the fight around Amfreville. What is particularly interesting about the battle for the village is that No. 45 (RM) Commando used the same tactics used by Peter Young at Vaagsø two and half years earlier – the advance through buildings rather than main street, the use of covering fire from enfilading positions, heavy suppressive fire from LMGs and mortars, and the use of well-armed assault teams to deal with enemy strongpoints.



A final inspection of men from No. 41 (RM) Commando before landing in Sicily on 9 July 1943. The men wear inflatable lifejackets over their light khaki drill uniforms, while behind them a stack of Army-issue bicycles can be seen, for use by Commando reconnaissance patrols once the initial bridgehead had been secured.

In the fighting around Merville the Commandos relied on their training, and skill, as until reinforcements could reach them, they were effectively on their own. In the days

after D-Day, while the Commandos fought well, they suffered from their own integral lack of heavy weapons. They did, however, have supporting armour in the shape of the Centaur tanks of the Royal Marines' Armoured Support Group. The very presence of this armoured force was an indication that Commandos were not expected to play an integral part in large-scale amphibious operations, and even larger-scale land campaigns. The days of coastal raiding were now in the past.

The Commandos played a vital part in holding the Orne bridgehead on the left flank of Sword Beach, and when the breakout from the Normandy bridgehead began, the 1st and 4th Special Service Brigades advanced as far as the river Seine. After almost three months of continual combat the two Commando Brigades had suffered over 50 per cent casualties. The 1st Brigade was sent home to refit, while the 4th SS Brigade spearheaded the assault on Walcheren in the Scheldt Estuary – an operation designed to open the port of Antwerp to Allied supply convoys. On 6 December the term 'Special Service' was replaced by 'Commando', and so it was the 1st Commando Brigade that led the Rhine Crossings near Wesel, while 4th Commando Brigade mopped up German resistance in Holland. This drive into Germany ended with the surrender of the German Army, but the war was far from over. In fact, for the Commandos sent to the Far East, for the past year they had been fighting their own private war in the mangrove swamps of south-western Burma.



Assault Landing Craft carrying men of the 3rd Commando Brigade move up the Thegyan River in Arakan, in January 1945. Their objective is a landing area situated close to Hill 170, a position that was the key to the Japanese defences around Kangaw.

H ROYAL MARINE COMMANDO, 1944–45



On the right stands a Royal Marine Commando wearing the windproof smock – similar to the garment issued to airborne troops – without any identifying unit flashes. On his head is the green beret that was adopted by all commandos, while around his neck he wears a green scrim scarf. From the waist down he is dressed identically to the Army Commando shown [here](#). He carries a Thompson machine carbine, while spare 20-round magazine sticks are carried in the pockets of his smock as well as in the ammunition pouches of his 1937-pattern webbing.

On the left is an array of equipment issued to Commandos during the last years of the war. **(1)** No. 4 Rifle – the replacement for the SMLE, but largely similar in terms of function – together with a five-round clip of .30in. ammunition. **(2)** Bayonet and scabbard for the No. 4 Rifle – considerably shorter than the bayonet issued with the SMLE. **(3)** Fairbairn-Sykes Commando Knife Mark II and scabbard – similar to the earlier version, but of a more composite construction. **(4)** Commando wearing a snow smock and trousers issued to troops operating in

Norway together with woollen khaki gloves. **(5)** M1911 Colt Automatic Pistol – a .45in.-calibre weapon together with a holster, ammunition pouch and a spare seven-round magazine. **(6)** Bergen rucksack – a welcome replacement for the 1908-pattern pack – which was easy to discard and spread the weight evenly by means of a small metal frame. **(7)** Royal Navy issue pocket knife (with folding marlin spike) and lanyard. **(8)** Steel helmet Mark I* – identical to the helmet shown [here](#), but with the addition of a netting cover and scrim camouflage strips. **(9)** Bren Light Machine Gun with bipod mount extended. Its curved magazine held 30 .303in. rounds, although usually only 28 were loaded to avoid jamming. **(10)** The Royal Marines' 'globe and laurel' cap badge followed by unit insignia – the shoulder flashes of Nos. 40 and 45 Royal Marine Commandos, the Royal Navy Commandos who directed amphibious landings, and No. 3 Army Commando. Beneath them are two examples of the Combined Operations badge introduced in 1942, worn on each arm beneath the unit shoulder flash. When sewn on, the 'Tommy gun' always faced the front.

Arakan

In late 1943, the 3rd Special Service Brigade was sent to the Far East, to participate in the Allied counter-attack in Burma. These Commandos first saw action during Operation *Screwdriver* – a series of landings on the coast of Arakan (now Rakhine), on Burma's western coast. In December this culminated in the capture of Akyab Island. By then the formation had been re-designated the 3rd Commando Brigade, and in January it led a series of amphibious attacks on the Myebon peninsula. The aim was to cut off the retreating Japanese 54th Division – an objective which was achieved in late January with the capture of Hill 170, and the battle of Kangaw. The hill was captured and then held in the face of a series of determined Japanese assaults. Still, the Commandos held their ground, and the Japanese were unable to force their way past them.

Peter Young described one small probe his men faced:

They [the Japanese] put in a determined attack on the two forward troops of 1 Commando, hurling grenades as they came. One rather keen Jap came forward with a box of ammunition and planted it on the edge of a slit-trench, which happened to be occupied by a Commando soldier. That was a fatal mistake on the Jap's part. Some more of the enemy found their way to a hut which was occupied by one Lance-Corporal Littleton and some of his friends, who, according to one of the Sunday papers, promptly strangled the Japs with their bare hands. Be that as it may, they certainly had some bodies to show the next morning. In this fierce midnight clash the Japanese were beaten off, leaving behind nine dead, including an officer. No. 1 Commando lost one man killed, and an officer and ten others wounded.

An anonymous RM Commando recorded this account of another even more determined Japanese assault: 'Soon the Japs appeared, clambering up a little reentrant, at the top of which we had three sections, two from my troop and one from the troop on our left... The first wave of Japs were not very persistent, and were soon tumbling down the hill again, having come face to face with the steady and accurate fire from our two LMGs. It was evident that we had inflicted casualties, as the excited Nips were squealing in the paddy below, and near the summit of the hill sickly groans punctuated the eerie stillness.' The Japanese attacked a second time, but despite reaching within five yards of the Commando trenches they were stopped by heavy fire.

This battle for Hill 170 proved to be the decisive battle of the Arakan campaign, fought in appallingly difficult terrain – mangrove swamps, narrow alligator-infested rivers, swamps, paddy fields, rugged hills and dense patches of jungle. However, as in everything else, the men of the 3rd Commando Brigade had been extensively trained in jungle warfare, and so were able to fight and defeat the Japanese in this inhospitable landscape. After this difficult operation the 3rd Commando Brigade was withdrawn for rest and refitting, prior to being used in an invasion of Malaya. However, the war in the Pacific ended before the invasion took place. This, the last commando operation of the war, was fought with the skill and tenacity shown in all commando operations, from 1941 on. As such, Myebon, Kangaw and Burma became the final Commando battle honours in a long list that began with Vaagsø, and ended with these hard-fought struggles on the far side of the world.

COLLECTIONS AND MUSEUMS

The story of the wartime Commandos is covered in several museums around the United Kingdom. Foremost is the Imperial War Museum in Lambeth, South London, which houses a vast collection of artefacts, weapons, uniforms, documents and photos relating to Britain's armed forces during the two world wars. This includes a significant amount of objects relating to the Commandos, from rare examples of uniforms to the maps and orders used during particular commando raids. The museum also operates a secondary museum site at Duxford Airfield, where larger objects are housed.

Imperial War Museum London

Lambeth Road

London SE1 6HZ

www.iwm.org.uk

Imperial War Museum Duxford

Cambridgeshire CB22 4QR

www.iwm.org.uk

Also in London is the National Army Museum, located in Chelsea. While it covers the entire history of the British Army, it also has a substantial body of objects which help tell the story of the Commandos. The museum has also staged specific commando-themed exhibitions, while part of its permanent collection is devoted to Special Forces during the war. The Royal Marines Museum is housed in Southsea near Portsmouth, in what was once the Marines' officers' mess. It covers the entire history of the Corps from its formation in 1664 until the present day, but many of its displays are devoted to the Royal Marine Commandos and their operations during World War II. The Combined Forces Military Services Museum in Maldon, Essex, is well worth a visit as it contains a sizeable collection of uniforms and equipment relating to wartime Special Forces. These include a rare fully restored Goatley boat, once used by Army Commandos, and a Cockle Mark II canoe of the kind used during the Cockleshell Raid on Bordeaux in 1942.

Combined Military Services Museum

Station Road, Maldon, Essex, CM9 4LQ

www.cmsm.co.uk

National Army Museum

Royal Hospital Road, Chelsea, London SW3 4HT

www.nam.ac.uk

Royal Marines Museum

Eastney Esplanade,

Southsea, Portsmouth,

Hampshire, PO4 9PX

www.royalmarinesmuseum.co.uk

In Edinburgh, the War Museum in Edinburgh Castle, operated by the National Museum of Scotland, not only tells the story of the Scottish soldier but also covers Commando training in Scotland during the war. The museum has an extensive collection and the castle is also the home of two regimental museums. Two smaller museums in Scotland also cover the story of the Commandos. In the West Highland Museum in Fort William a gallery is devoted to the Commandos, and in particular to the training they carried out in the area. A Combined Operations Museum existed in Cherry Park, in the grounds of Inveraray Castle outside Fort William, but it closed its doors in 1998, and most of its collection was transferred to the Oban War and Peace Museum, which deals with activities in the Western Highlands during the world wars. In Achnacarry a tourist trail from the Clan Cameron Museum there guides visitors round the Commando training grounds.

Oban War & Peace Museum

Corran Esplanade,

Oban, Argyll, PA34 5PX

www.obanmuseum.org.uk

Finally, there is the Commando Memorial near Spean Bridge. Designed by Scott Sutherland and erected in 1952, this powerful, simple yet moving monument features three commandos looking over their World War II training grounds. It is close to Achnacarry House, the centre of wartime Commando training, and in the nearby village of Spean Bridge the local hotel once used as a watering hole by off-duty Commandos now houses an impressive privately owned Commando Museum.

The Commando Museum

Spean Bridge Hotel

Spean Bridge

Inverness-shire, PH34 4ES

www.commando.speanbridgehotel.co.uk

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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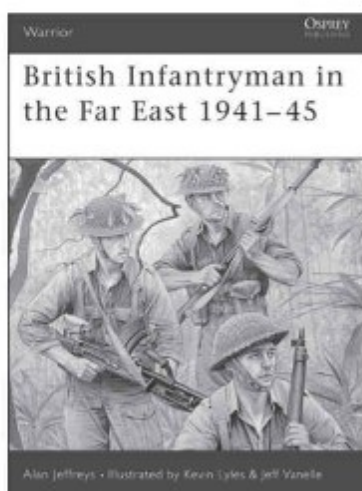
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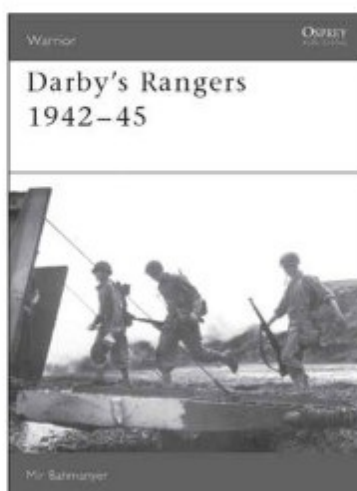
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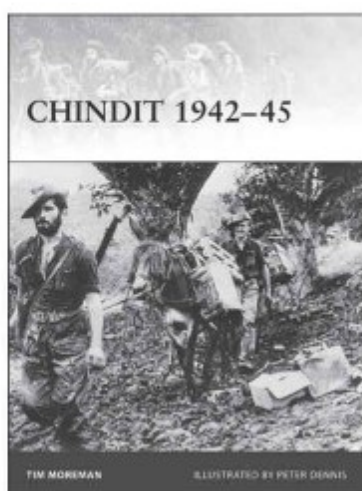
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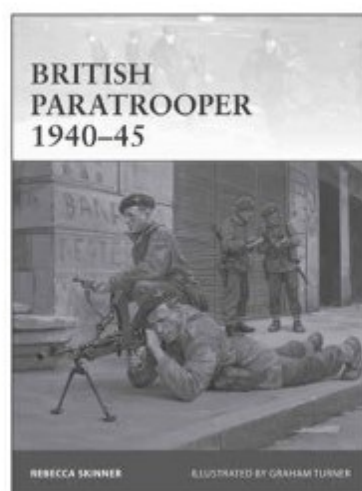
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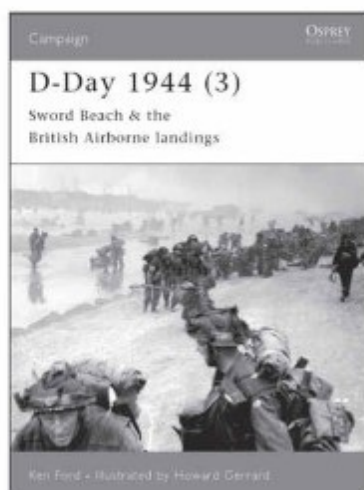


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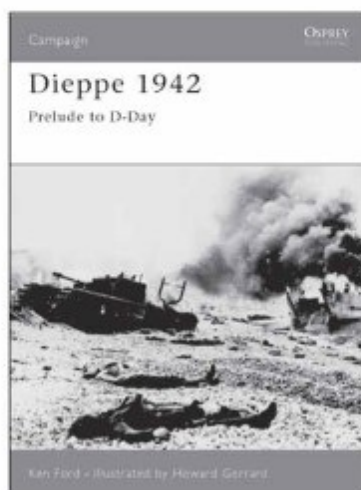


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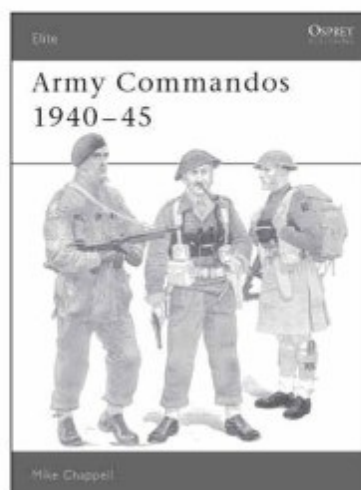
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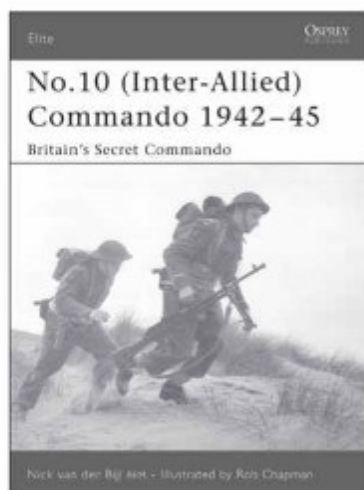
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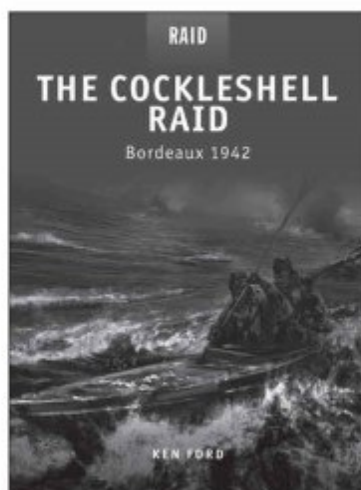
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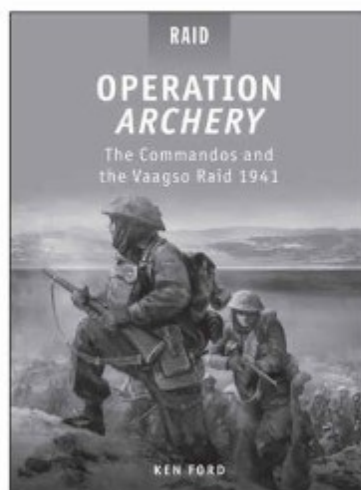
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